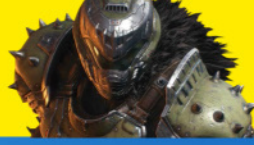
DOOM: THE DARK AGES



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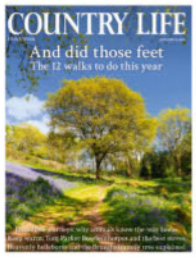

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PHOTOGRAPHS (BACKGROUND) POLLY WREFORD

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"INZOI LOOKS LIKE IT IS SET TO STEAL THE SIMS' LIFE SIM CROWN"

There's no doubting that, 25 years after *The Sims* first graced monitors around the world, it has been the life sim series of choice for millions of PC gamers. Its impact on the genre and PC gaming in general should be celebrated, as few other series have managed to deliver so much fun and escapism for players so consistently.

ROBERT JONES
Twitter
@rnicholasj

This month
Discovered that PC Gamer Towers is actually run by a big white fluffy cat called Peeceecat. Was tasked with bringing the boss a meowtini. Shaken, not purred, of course.

However, the reign of any king eventually comes to an end, and Krafton's stunning new life sim game, *inZOI*, looks like it is set to steal *The Sims'* long-held crown, as our in-depth, world-exclusive cover feature reveals.

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team

PHIL SAVAGE
Twitter
@Octaeder

This month
Stormed around the streets of Bath while clubbing console gamers with a giant foam mace.

MORGAN PARK
Twitter
@MorganRPark

This month
Was found in his birthday suit while hanging from a telegraph pole. Shinobi? Shinudei, more like.

IAN EVENDEN
Bluesky
@ianev.bsky.social

This month
Was found, shovel in hand, in Highgate Cemetery. He says he has experiments to do.

JESS KINGHORN
Twitter
@KoeniginKatze

This month
Went full villainess mode. Bought every Steak Bake in the local branch of Greggs.

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Misfires like *Anthem* have tarnished BioWare's name.

A GHOST OF ITSELF

The once-legendary BIOWARE has lost at least half its staff

Bloomberg reports that, following EA's layoffs and restructuring at BioWare, the studio now has fewer than 100 employees, down from more than 200 during the development of *Dragon Age: The Veilguard*. Meanwhile, at its peak, BioWare consisted of three studios and, conservatively, over 400 employees.

Interestingly, Bloomberg's sources say that the plan to "loan" BioWare developers to other EA studios while the next *Mass Effect* was in pre-production was put in place shortly after *Veilguard* launched, but before its sales failure came to light. Solid numbers are hard to come by, but even conservatively, I think we can estimate that peak BioWare was around 400-500 employees strong for much of the last decade, based on reporting from across that period.

Even with BioWare's reported internal struggles with a slapdash crunch culture and confused development goals on *Mass Effect: Andromeda* and *Anthem*, I don't know how to view this as anything other than a failure on the part of EA.

ITS PARENT COMPANY NEVER REALLY KNEW WHAT TO DO WITH THE STUDIO

HOUSEHOLD NAME

Over the past ten years, the once-dominant mega publisher has squandered what was the household name in North American RPG development, the originator of a cinematic RPG form that continues to deliver excellent games, impressive profits, and stable employment at studios like Larian, CD Projekt and Obsidian. BioWare's EA-mandated pivots to and from live service

THAT'S ALL FOLKS! (AGAIN)

SHUTTING DOWN

Stop me if you've heard this one before: *MultiVersus* is going offline. Again. Unfortunately, it's a bit different to the original (planned) June 2023 shutdown, which lasted 11 months. It's for good this time, as Player First Games announced the fifth season would be the game's last. ■ ***MT***

INCOGNITO MODE

WHERE YOU LEAST EXPECT IT

The official *Assassin's Creed Shadows* artbook leaked. Not big news, I know, but wait until you hear where: the entire thing was uploaded to a site dedicated to, ahem, animated pornography, or hentai. Presumably the site's usual punters were confused and more than a bit disappointed. ■ ***JW***

GIMME A WEEK

UPSCALING MADE EASY

You know DLSS, the GPU tech that has helped increase framerates on since its release in 2019? According to a new book on Nvidia, The Nvidia Way: Jensen Huang and the Making of a Tech Giant, that was all CEO Huang's idea, and it went from concept to confirmed in just two weeks. ■ ***JR***

TOP: Has BioWare's spirit been drained once and for all?

ABOVE: It all started at glorious 480p in Candlekeep.

indicate to me that its parent company never really knew what to do with the studio.

Plenty of the staff now departing have made good stuff in the past. Trick Weekes, for instance, wrote Mordin in *Mass Effect 2* and *3* – as well as Iron Bull and Solas in *Inquisition*. The foibles of *Veilguard* haven't left me irate so much as a little despondent and wondering whether scrapping decades of talent is the right move at all.

That's a despondency shared by Michael Douse, publishing director of *Baldur's Gate III*, who took to X in a series of posts this week that more or less tore into EA for letting go of so much institutional talent. He writes, "It is possible not to lay off large parts of your development teams between or after projects. Critically, retaining that institutional knowledge is key for the next [game]. It's often used as an excuse to 'trim fat' and to an extent I understand that under financial pressure, but doesn't that just highlight how needless the aggressive efficiency of giant corporations is?" Douse caps off the post with, "On a pirate ship, they'd toss the captain overboard."

A beloved gaming institution and its influential fantasy worlds have been utterly squandered, to say nothing of the lives and talents of those who passed through BioWare's offices. ■

Ted Litchfield

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

Could and should
GOG has resurrected *Dino Crisis 1* and *2*.

Under the sea
Retro YouTuber Clint Basinger built 25-year dynasty of aquarium screensavers just because he hated the one in Windows 95.

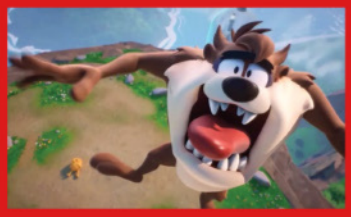
Artificial Stupidity
Scalping bots are hoovering up RTX 5090s on eBay, so some sellers are just listing framed pictures of the GPU for $1,000s to trick them.

Suffering Succotash
MultiVersus' game director said of issues, "When there are threats to harm it's crossing the line."

Flying solo
The drone operator who damaged an LA firefighting plane was Peter Akemann, who co-founded Treyarch.

Brass balls
OpenAI is complaining about DeepSeek scraping its data. The same data it's been scraping from everyone else.

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy has roped many dopes with a surprise comeback over the years. Xbox bigwig Phil Spencer once thought he could beat The Spy at a cheeseburger-eating contest, for example. However, after making it seem like The Spy was down and out after eating The Spy's seventh Manhatten Explosion triple cheeseburger, thereby luring Phil into a false sense of security, The Spy then rallied to lay him out for the count by polishing off 13. As a result, today the Golden Cheeseburger Award sits proudly in PC Gamer Towers and not in Xbox's Redmond HQ.

Or take the time when Hideo Kojima boasted that he could take more photographs of himself with famous actors than The Spy. What a dope! Everyone knows that The Spy has more celebrity wefies in his collection than Gabe Newell has knives. For a moment Kojima thought he had The Spy licked when he whipped out a wefie of him with Alec Baldwin. But when The Spy countered with a picture of The Spy hanging out with Joseph David Kucan dressed as Kane from *Command & Conquer*, Kojima wilted in the face of such majesty. The lesson here? The Spy is always strongest when The Spy appears weakest, and a legendary master of the comeback.

THE SPY
The Spy is Terry Bogard's sparring partner.

HUNGRY WOLVES

And, speaking of legendary comebacks, The Spy is happy to report that a sequel to the now long-forgotten but legendary versus fighter, *Garou: Mark of the Wolves*, is incoming, with *Fatal Fury: City of the Wolves* set for release 26 years after the original on April 26, 2025. The Spy, or course, knew all about this project already, as The Spy has been following the trials, tribulations and sales of its production company, SNK, ever since the Japanese firm was in its original 1990s incarnation pomp.

The Spy was there in 2001 when, hiding under founder of the company Eikichi Kawasaki's desk, The Spy heard how the former arcade and versus fighter titan was to close due to financial troubles. This shuttering came just two years after it had released what many still consider to be the cherry on top of the traditional 2D versus fighter cake in *Garou: Mark of the Wolves*, a stunning slugfest that seemed to wrap up over 15 years of fighting game expertise into one last hurrah for the genre.

WE'RE NOW MERE MONTHS AWAY FROM A BRAND-NEW, FULL-FAT COMEBACK

Fast forward to 2025, though, and after decades of former SNK IP assets changing hands, new companies set up and disbanded, company name and ownership changes, and a gradual re-awaking of SNK in its traditional form as a company that specialises in making versus fighting games, we're now mere months away from a brand-new, full-fat comeback for the *Fatal Fury* brand, with *City of the Wolves* offering a massive roster of fighters both returning and new, various gameplay modes including a singleplayer RPG campaign set in the legendary South Town, tons of character customisation options, a new REV gameplay system that offers unique moves for combatants, a variety of DLC with season pass option, a juke box mode, Unreal Engine graphics, and plenty more, too. A strong comeback, then? According to what The Spy has seen, all signs point to a knockout. Spy out. ■

The Spy

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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES

Nvidia made a special edition RTX 4080 Super to celebrate *Half Life 2*'s anniversary.

HALF-LIGHT

A VALVE engineer had to tell the GPU companies they were wrong

The PC gaming icon that is *Half-Life 2* turned 20 last November, and Valve pulled out all the stops to celebrate: a major new update, a commentary track and a documentary absolutely crammed with digressions about the challenge the studio set itself. And one of them was lighting. The development of *Half-Life 2* was rooted in what multiple staff describe as "the tech wishlist," which would take six years to fully realise and was absolutely foundational to what Valve wanted to achieve with the game.

"[It] was a main feature that the light felt very, very realistic and intuitive because of the Source engine and the work, the collaboration between artists and engineers," says *Half-Life 2*'s lead artist Viktor Antonov, before introducing our hero. "Ken Birdwell, he was a fan about photography and getting the lighting right."

Ken Birdwell was one of the earliest hires at Valve (he left the company in 2016) and, like pretty much every Valve employee, wore multiple hats over his time there. But he can fairly be described as an extraordinarily talented computer engineer. Antonov actually undersells the photography angle. Birdwell worked for TeleCalc (a B2B software company) in the 1980s, and clearly saved up enough cash to pursue his passions after leaving: from 1990-94 he studied painting, photography and animation at Evergreen State University and left with a fine arts degree. On *Half-Life* he primarily worked on the first game's animations and AI (as well as having the idea for the G-Man). When *Half-Life 2* rolled around, there was probably no one in the world more suited to pursue the cutting-edge lighting Valve was after. Sure enough, he immediately noticed a problem.

BAD MATHS

"The math that we were using was wrong," says Birdwell. "And not only that, the math that everybody was using was wrong. And then as I started to correct it I realised just how bad it was... and then I fixed it and suddenly everything looked great! I had to go tell the hardware guys, the people who made hardware accelerators, that fundamentally the math was wrong on their cards. That took about two-and-a-half years. I could not convince [them]. Finally we hired Gary McTaggart [from 3DFX] and Charlie Brown and those guys had enough pull... I have a fine arts major, nobody's gonna listen to me."

Birdwell smiles in the documentary while delivering that last line, which we'll allow because this guy fixed the math being used for lighting so hard that the manufacturers of graphics cards had to change how they added numbers. I found this thought too

Patently luminous

While trying to get in touch with Birdwell I found an unrelated patent granted to Valve in 2007 on which he's listed as the inventor. Patent #20070195090 is for, ahem, "Determining Illumination of Models Using an Ambient Framing Abstractions" and summarises itself as "a system and method for determining light illumination on a model in a virtual environment." Y'know, the simple stuff.

FAR LEFT: An unmodded shot of *Half-Life 2* shows how effectively the lighting set the mood.

LEFT: G-Man knows how to work that lighting.

RAVENHOLM SWEET HOME *In 2004, Ravenholm's spooky lighting was peak atmosphere*

SHADOW
If a headcrab zombie sees its shadow, we're in for six more weeks of screams.

SPOTLIGHT
Ravenholm's spotlights weren't exactly subtle. But better than yellow paint?

LAMPLIGHT
Any sign of the padre illuminated by lamplight meant a moment of relief.

FLAMES
Finally, some proper illumination! Just, uh, ignore the bodies.

fascinating to leave alone, and sought out Birdwell to ask if he could expand a little.

"It's a bit technical," he tells me, "but the simple version is that graphics cards at the time always stored RGB textures and even displayed everything as non-linear intensities, meaning that an 8-bit RGB value of 128 encodes a pixel that's about 22% as bright as a value of 255, but the graphics hardware was doing lighting calculations as though everything was linear. The net result was that lighting always looked off. If you were trying to shade something that was curved, the dimming due to the surface angle aiming away from the light source would get darker way too quickly. Just like the example above, something that was supposed to end up looking 50% as bright as full intensity ended up looking only 22% as bright on the display. It looked very unnatural, instead of a nice curve everything was shaded way too extreme, rounded shapes looked oddly exaggerated."

Birdwell says this remains "a super common graphics mistake" and even today certain areas of programming require the coder "to keep in mind that all the bitmap values are probably non-linear, you can't just add them together or blend them or mix them with linear calculations without considering what 'gamma space' you're working in".

The good news is that "modern graphics cards know all this now," he says. The reason your AMD or Nvidia card gets it right, though, is probably a fine arts graduate. "All through the '90s up to maybe the early 2010s it wasn't the case," says Birdwell. "You had to be super aware of what 'gamma space' you were in at each step of the process or things would look super weird. The problem was, when I pointed this out to the graphics hardware manufacturers in '99 and early 2000s, I hit the 'you've just pointed out that my chips are fundamentally broken until we design brand new silicon, I hate you' reaction. That wasn't a fun conversation. It went through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, etcetera, all in rapid succession with each new manufacturer. I was very happy to pass off those conversations to the newly hired *HL2* graphics programmers Gary McTaggert and Charlie Brown, who worked through it all step by painful step over the years."

BIRDWELL IS SOME SORT OF GOD OF VIDEOGAME LIGHTING

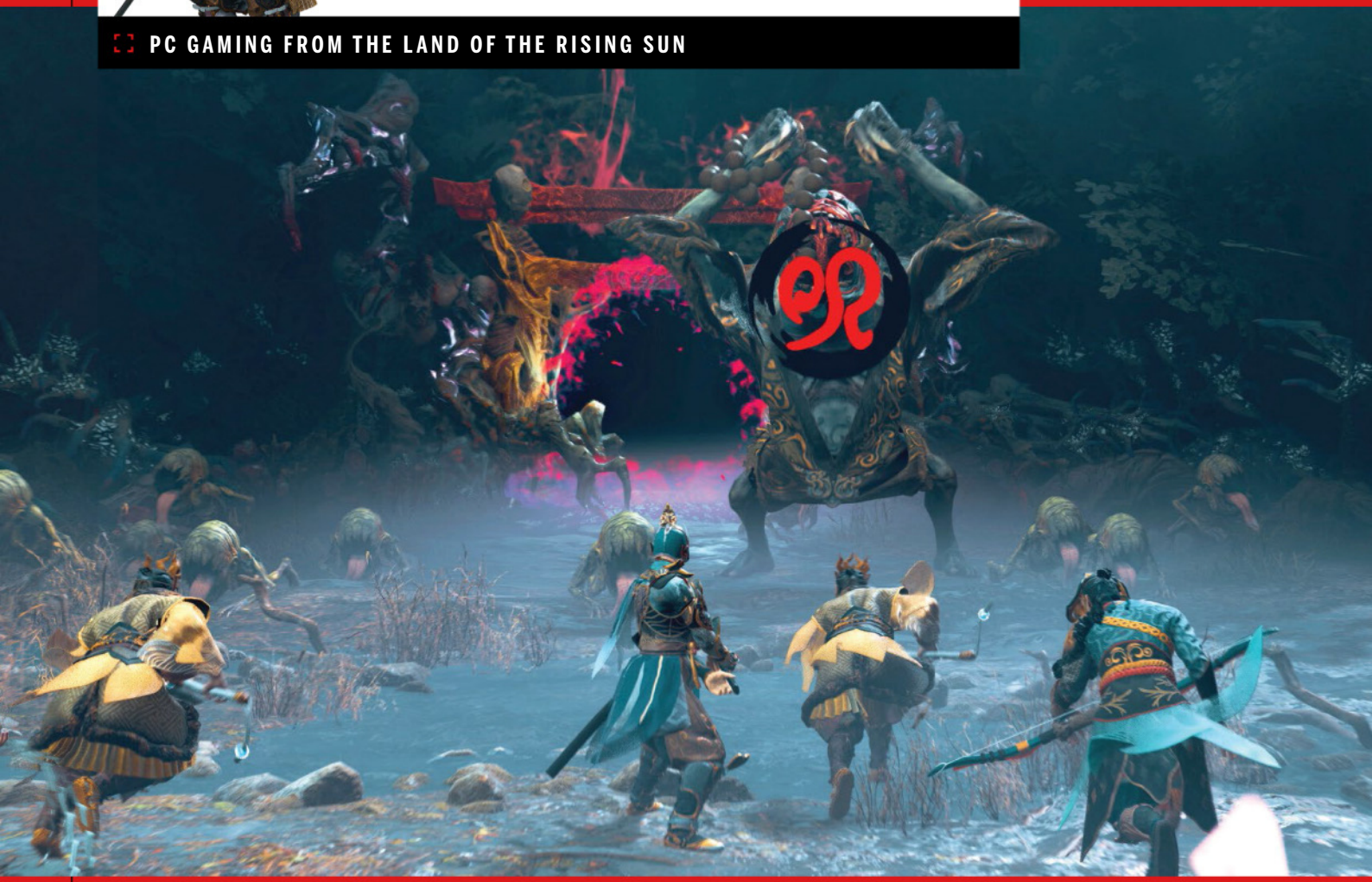
I don't go around crowning deities lightly, but it's clear at this point that Birdwell is some sort of god of videogame lighting. In the documentary, producer Bill Van Buren says that there were three key principles to *Half-Life 2* and the lighting was part of the first. "To make something that was immersive," says Van Buren, "visually really rich and appealing, something more like you would see in a film, and the art direction and the tech to make that happen."

Valve certainly achieved that. There are many, many people responsible for that achievement, but Ken Birdwell is why the lighting looks so good, and he did such an outstanding job that you can probably argue every game since has benefitted from it. Or, to put it another way, our graphics cards certainly have. ■

Rich Stanton

Made in Japan

PC GAMING FROM THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN



KUNITSU-GAMI: PATH OF THE GODDESS

Capcom's masterpiece now playable on PC Game Pass

K*unitsu-Gami: Path of the Goddess* was one of 2024's best but, ultimately, underrated games, with its maker Capcom left surprised by its low sales compared to its high quality and breakthrough innovations, the latter for which the game was nominated at the Game Awards 2024 for Best Sim/Strategy Game.

But, in good news for PC gamers around the world, *Kunitsu-Gami: Path of the Goddess* is now playable on PC Game Pass, and if you haven't yet given this little gem some attention, then I feel now is the time, as this is a very high-quality Japanese game that all gamers should play at least once in their life.

DR MARCO ZANGIROLAMI
Marco is an expert on the Japanese gaming industry, having reported on its PC, console and arcade industry since 1996. Not many people know this, but Marco is the inspiration for Studio Ghibli's Porco Rosso, operating at the weekend as a freelance bounty hunter pilot in the Adriatic Sea.

The game, which is produced by Capcom's *Biohazard/Resident Evil* studio and released on the Resident Evil engine, is about a Shintoist sorceress named Yoshiro (that resembles the protagonist of legendary 1986 Taito arcade release *Kiki Kaikai*) whose mission is to purify the Kafuku mountain from evil spirits climbing down every night into the nearby villages.

YOU CAN DEFEND HER BY SUMMONING VILLAGERS AND GIVING THEM 'JOBS'

Our mission as a samurai warrior, though, is to defend the sorceress Yoshiro during the day while she attends to the needs of the people in the villages, as well as during the night when the yokai spirits attack the villages and also try to kill the sorceress. You can defend her yourself as well as by summoning villagers and giving them 'jobs'.

With iconic ancestry and strong Japanese storytelling, *Kunitsu-Gami: Path of the Goddess* is an action strategy game in which graphics, art and game design coalesce into a very memorable, unique experience, which is something demonstrated by PC Gamer's high score of 86%. A game of immense quality that shines out in a sea of average remakes and remasters. Play it now.
shorturl.at/LC1eT

NINJA GAIDEN 2 BLACK

Ninja Gaiden 2 strikes back in Unreal Engine 5

Soon after the legendary game designer Tomonobu Itagaki left Tecmo in 2008, Team Ninja gave birth to what is considered the peak of this evergreen IP. *Ninja Gaiden 2 Black* is the remake of the sequel of the Ninja Gaiden series released in 2008.

Following that release, the game was then ported to Sony's PlayStation 3 a year later, but rebranded as *Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2* and also remixed some both technically, such as in the graphics department, where polygon rates were reduced, but also in terms of gameplay, with new characters and missions added, blood colour changed, and various other smaller tweaks made. Now, 15 years later, PC gamers get to finally enjoy the best of both worlds, with *Ninja Gaiden 2 Black* offering an Unreal Engine 5-powered remake that takes the best elements of both console releases and packages them up into a Steam release that, as you can see in this issue's review section, is a strong action game well worth a look if hyper-violent ninja combat is your bag. See p70 for the review. **shorturl.at/tcuFo**

SUIKODEN I & II HD REMASTER

The iconic JRPG saga from Konami finally arrives on PC

Historically, *Suikoden* was Konami's answer to Square's *Final Fantasy*, and now, after a long wait of thirty years, the original two entries in this storied JRPG series will be finally playable on PC and in English, too. This is because Konami is currently reviving all of its IPs and, as I've reported on previously, is looking keenly at the PC as an area of focus and growth.

These HD remasters are not radically changed from the originals, remaining very faithful to the traditional '90s JRPG style. So there's no spoken dialogue, no revolution in the combat system and no jump to 3D polygons. The art style remains in the pixel-art style of the original releases, but it is now accompanied by new effect animations, higher-quality environmental sound effects and upgraded background illustrations. Collector's take note, this release also has a limited nine CD box set (only for the Japanese market) for 9,900 yen (£50) that will include the complete soundtrack, unreleased BGM music from the '90s versions, and a new arranged version, too. **shorturl.at/t9tTu**

LIKE A DRAGON: PIRATE YAKUZA IN HAWAII

Shiver me timbers!

After the departure of Toshihiro Nagoshi (*Daytona USA*, *Scud Race*, *Virtua Stiker*), it seems like the Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio – led now by Masayoshi Yokoyama – may be running a little short of ideas.

Case in point, the new game in the long-running *Yakuza* saga will be set in a world of pirates, with the setting of such piratical escapades being the Honolulu game world already seen in *Like a Dragon: Infinite Wealth*. However, this time out, the protagonist is Goro Majima, the mad dog character of the *Yakuza* series. **shorturl.at/1ABvy**

Incoming

THE BIGGEST GAMES ON THE WAY

1 month

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

RELEASE March 20, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft

After a series of delays the new action-adventure finally arrives. Play as Naoe the shinobi assassin and Yasuke the samurai warrior in a tale set in feudal Japan.

ATOMFALL

RELEASE March 27, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Rebellion

A western version of *STALKER* that is set in the British countryside, *Atomfall* is a survival-action game set in the aftermath of the apocalypse. Cricket bats guaranteed.

INZOI

RELEASE March 28, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Krafton

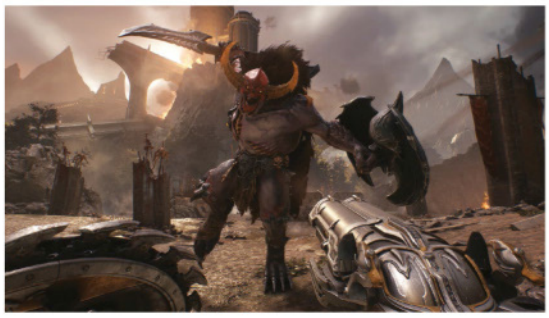
A graphically impressive new *The Sims* rival. Create, take control of, and observe the lives of Zois, with deep new customisation and construction options on offer.

2 months

FATAL FURY: CITY OF THE WOLVES

RELEASE April 24, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** SNK

The legendary versus fighting series returns with a sequel to the 1999 classic, *Garou: Mark of the Wolves*. Fight in the iconic world of South Town with a day one PC release.



DOOM: THE DARK AGES

RELEASE May 15, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** id Software

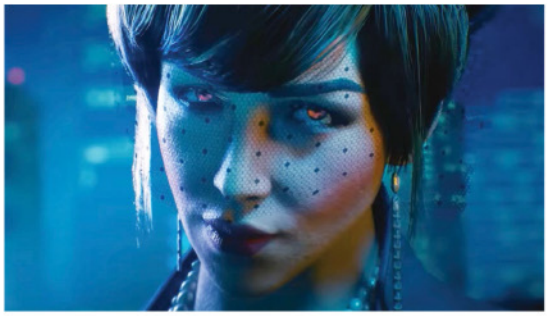
Doom goes historical, with the player stepping into the shoes of a living super weapon who fights in a hyper-violent medieval war against hell. Heavy metal guaranteed.

CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

RELEASE April 24, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Sandfall Interactive

Lead the members of Expedition 33 on their quest to destroy the Paintress so that she can never paint death again. Dark fantasy, turn-based RPG.

3 months



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** The Chinese Room

Despite development troubles and multiple delays to its release date, we remain hopeful that this first-person World of Darkness RPG has proper fangs.

ELDEN RING: NIGHTREIGN

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** FromSoftware, Inc.

The out-of-left-field *Elden Ring* spin-off sees the action RPG transformed into a wild new co-op roguelike. Expect fast runs and the series' typically epic bosses.

MAFIA: THE OLD COUNTRY

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Hangar 13

Uncover the origins of Italy's mafia in a gritty mob story set in the brutal underworld of 1900s Sicily. A visually rich new cinematic third-person action-adventure.

4 months+

BORDERLANDS 4

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Gearbox

The mayhem-fuelled looter-shooter returns with promises billions of weapons, outrageous enemies and intense co-op action. Here's hoping it's better than the movie!

DUNE: AWAKENING

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Funcom

An open-world, multiplayer survival game set in the iconic sci-fi universe of Dune. Can you survive Arrakis, the most dangerous planet in the cosmos?

SPLITGATE 2

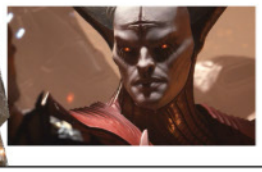
RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** 1047 Games

If you wanted to know what would happen if you smashed *Unreal Tournament*, *Halo* and *Portal* together, then *Splitgate 2* answers that. Frenetic shooting action.

MOD

CLOAKING ON

Now these are just lovely. Five uniquely designed cloaks with matching hoods for your next *Baldur's Gate III* character. These cloaks are designed to work with all tall body types, too, such as human, elf and githyanki. Grab them here: tinyurl.com/3n36xnae



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
May 15, 2025	id Software	Bethesda Softworks	doom.bethesda.net

DOOM: THE DARK AGES

Eternal was all about acrobatics, this wants you to stand and fight

There are two key things to take away from *Doom: The Dark Ages*' showing at the recent Xbox Developer Direct. The first: a release date. id Software's prequel to 2016's *Doom* revival will be with us in just a few months, on May 15. The second: a mission statement. "In *Doom Eternal*, you felt like a fighter jet. In *Doom: The Dark Ages*, you'll be an iron tank," says game director Hugo Martin.

Since the 2016 reboot of *Doom*, players have been challenged to jump around arenas in a constant acrobatic showcase – always moving, often jumping, always cycling through a tool suite designed to replenish resources and keep you in the fight, constantly on the attack. In *Doom Eternal* this combat loop was taken to the extreme. For some this was a natural progression. For others it was all just a bit too much.

The Dark Ages, then, promises to be more grounded – not necessarily slower, but less reliant on acrobatics. In the showcase, id shouts out the original *Doom* games – throughout what's shown, the Doom Slayer is boots on the ground, circle-strafing to dodge projectiles with not a jump pad in sight.

MIGHTY SHIELD

The new Shield Saw is emblematic of this shift. It's a shield, letting you block, parry and deflect attacks, giving you scope to mitigate damage instead of being forced to avoid it. It's also a chainsaw that you can throw Captain America-style at a pack of demons. "With your shield and the parrying capabilities, you kind of push forward into these combat encounters where you're getting mano a mano with a heavy demon – something badass," says executive producer Marty Stratton in a Q&A session with press ahead of the Developer Direct showcase. "It's launching attacks at you, you're parrying them away. It really does have this stand-and-fight, melee, use your guns as additional ways to burn him down. And then you push forward to the next one… it feels totally fresh and new."

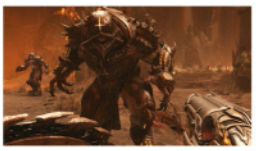
THE SHIELD IS ALSO A CHAINSAW THAT YOU CAN THROW LIKE CAPTAIN AMERICA

It quickly becomes clear that the new pace represents a major shift for how the modern *Doom* series plays. During the Q&A, game director Hugo Martin highlights "responsive and ergonomic" controls as being one of the core pillars of *The Dark Ages*' design. The Shield Saw, for instance, is a contextual tool – its actions stemming "all from one input".

"The buttons that are critical to me as a player when you play *Doom: The Dark Ages* are buttons that I'm familiar with, that my fingers happen to be on," says Martin. "When people get stressed, they tend to squeeze the controller. That's usually when a demon is pressuring them and is close to them. Well when you squeeze the controller – mouse and keyboard is obviously separate – you're going to press down on the right thumbstick. Well that's a critical part of your arsenal: the melee. The left trigger is something that's very familiar to people, and that's where all the shield play is. And obviously the trigger for the guns, the right trigger. These are buttons and inputs that are really familiar to people. We focused on those this time, just so you could master the control scheme faster and we can ask more of you sooner."

FIRST LOOK

And look, I'll admit this has me worried. I am a 40-year-old PC gamer. I was raised in the fires of keyboard elitism – every possible action having its own button, each game requiring new muscle memory to develop. I am never happier than when I get to press Q to lean left. And so a major combat tool – one that can parry, block and attack – being entirely triggered through a single button-press feels like a major limitation. In the heat of the moment, as the demons are pushing in, will the game always correctly interpret



what I mean to do when I press that button? Put another way, if *Doom Eternal* valued speed and acrobatics to the point of being too intense for some players, is *The Dark Ages* swinging too far in the other direction? id's pretty emphatic that the game is still true to *Doom*'s essence. When asked if the focus on accessibility will take away from the *Doom* experience, Martin gives an emphatic "no".

"'Accessible' taken the wrong way means 'easy', says Martin. "Challenge matters in games and it's a part of engagement. But it's really about making it simplified. Every great product is simple and easy to use, and that allows the user to do more with it. I use this analogy: in the '90s they had MP3 players and they were really complex looking… everything looked like it was out of the Nebuchadnezzar from the Matrix and they were really cool. And then Steve Jobs made the iPod and it was just a box with a circle on it. But no one could say it wasn't smart and intelligent and had a tremendous amount of depth – in fact it had more depth. Because as we simplify the control schemes everything gets easier to use and I can ask more of you.

"If you have too many buttons to press then I can't really press you as the designer because you're searching for the right button to hit. But if I streamline things – and I have fewer strings on the guitar and it's a truly ergonomic control scheme that's intuitive to the player, then we can ask a lot of you. Accessibility is about streamlining the experience and making it more ergonomic and really just simplifying it for the player … you shouldn't be fighting the controls, you should be fighting the bad guys."

It's not a mentality I particularly agree with, but it's still one that could work out in *The Dark Ages*' favour. The crucial part here is id Software's claim that a more simplified control scheme can give them the scope to ask more of the player elsewhere. It's the biggest unknown for me in a showcase that, otherwise, feels like some classic *Doom* bombast. The look, the sound, the cacophony of the weapons all scratches a very specific itch that the series consistently nails – this time with an appropriately medieval twist.

THE CACOPHONY OF THE WEAPONS ALL SCRATCHES A VERY SPECIFIC ITCH

Martin compares the new arsenal of weapons to "torture devices" as a direct response to this game's theme. Shout out to the Rail Spike, finally giving *Doom* a way to pin enemies to walls. It all looks and sounds brutal; appropriately metal. Everything on show here screams *Doom*.

BIGGER LEVELS

The levels are bigger too, incorporating more sandbox environments. id stresses that it's not an open-world game and remains a linear shooter, but within the larger environments you'll be able to head off in different directions to hunt down loads of secrets and things to power up the Doom Slayer. Stratton calls the environments "a dramatic expansion for our worlds" and there are some clear big set-piece moments thanks to the addition of a giant mech you can pilot and a dragon you can fly around on.

Even the rhythm of the action does look appealing. There's a nice heft to the parries and deflections – you can tell it's going to feel good to engage in that combat loop. *The Dark Ages* is also modifying glory kills, replacing the locked-in-place animations with something more natural and in-the-moment, which is a sensible choice for a game that focuses more on strafing and ground positioning. In that sense, it can hark back to an older style of *Doom* – a screen full of projectiles to avoid, but also an arsenal that can satisfyingly serve a specific power fantasy. A toolkit that lets you cut through the demons of hell. As long as the basics do feel good – however many buttons you need to press to make it all happen – *The Dark Ages* will be another classic in id's FPS catalogue.

While I do have some doubts, they're not quite enough to dampen my excitement. id Software has proven itself already with the *Doom* series – the 2016 game is up there alongside some of my favourite shooters. And while I don't agree with the idea that more control complexity prevents a designer from being able to "press" the player, I also take the point that simpler controls can still support depth through encounter design. If id can successfully thread this needle – a more streamlined control scheme that offers challenge through enemy design, then I'm hopeful that this will be a worthy successor to some of the most compelling shooters. We won't know until we get our hands on *The Dark Ages*, but for now I'm optimistic that id's gambit will pay off.

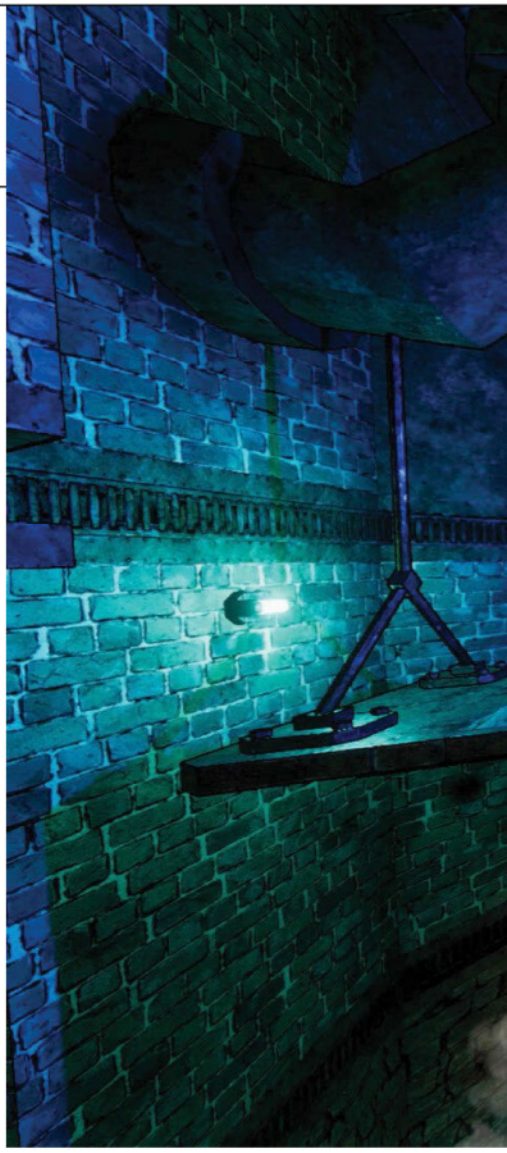
Phil Savage

Doom Slayer climbs into a giant mech to punch a very large demon.

ABOVE: The new weapons are pleasingly gothic and ornate.

LEFT: If it's medieval, you've got to have a castle.

Gravelord



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
January 22 (Early Access)	Fatbot Games	Fatbot Games	s.team/a/1823990

GRAVELORD

Riiiiiiise from your grave. And bash things with a shovel

As an xennial, the phrase 'boomer shooter' is becoming almost offensive. This is not the kind of game my mum would have liked. It's the kind of game I like. With guns, graves and godlike speed on offer, it's likely to be the kind of game you like too.

The speed at which your character moves is remarkable, as if he's on ice skates and has been given a great big push across some sort of low-friction surface. Later in the game spring-heeled boots are promised, which will increase his speed even further. I was playing it in 4K on an RTX4080 Super with vsync well and truly switched on, and the absolute smoothness of the game was a joy. It's a Unity production with some lower-poly, '90s style character models and environments – though they're the sort of thing we imagined our games looked like in the '90s rather than what actually appeared on the screen – and it moves at a fantastic pace. The low minimum specs point to it potentially working well on the Steam Deck.

Your character (Queedo the Gravedigger, "dumb as hell, but strong as a horse" apparently) doesn't seem like the sort to always run, but perhaps there's a mystical reason why he can, beyond the 'always run' button being ticked by default in the game options. He works for Death himself, and a short intro sequence shows him putting the risen dead back into their graves, grumbling all the while, and his default weapon is his gravedigging spade, a family heirloom. It's quite effective at stoving in the heads of the first few reanimated corpses you face, and while you'll pick up a flintlock pistol soon enough after the first map starts to take out foes from a distance, getting up close remains a viable combat tactic throughout. Later, you'll get an assortment of traditional shooter weapons – a double-barrelled shotgun and some sort of energy weapon among them. Not only are you fighting reanimated corpses, but strange flying creatures that teleport in, *Doom*-style, through a glowing sigil written on the sky, as well as monstrous fish in the underwater sections.

BLASTING ALL MANNER OF DISFIGURED BEASTS FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE

MONSTER MASH

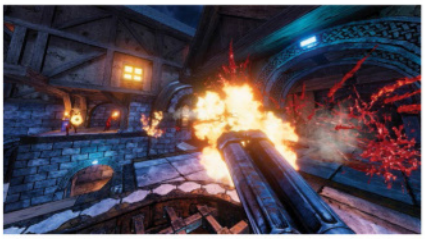
Of course there are upgrades, with gatling guns and explosive launchers also on show, as well as tarot cards to be collected that will add additional skills. The first is a choice between spade attacks that do extra damage and heal you, or the chance to set your foes on fire. This is a tricky one, and it's almost worth quicksaving just before you pick up the card just so you can try them both out. We're also promised additional fire modes and what are called 'synergies' – probably boosts that occur when you use the correct pair of weapons in quick succession or have an appropriate pair of tarot cards equipped.

PLAYED IT

Weapon pickups spin on the ground in true *Quake* style, while armour shards and health packs are readily available. There is a story here, delivered in comic-book panels that you collect as you progress further into whatever hellish underworld this is, and while it involves a rich industrialist and vials of life-prolonging potion, it's really secondary to the simple enjoyment of skating through levels designed with fun in mind, blasting all manner of disfigured beasts from beyond the grave back into oblivion with weapons that are both wildly unlikely and yet also extremely effective.

It's the sort of thing that great videogames can be made of, and as it speeds into Early Access it could be worth keeping an eye on *Gravelord*, if only to see what gems it can unearth while pillaging the varied resting places of classic game design.

Ian Evenden



The comic-book panels can be quite grown-up at times.

ABOVE: Energy weapons have a *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* feel about them.

LEFT: This deer-like fellow makes a contrast to the reanimated corpses of the early game.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
March 20, 2025	Ubisoft Quebec	Ubisoft	ubisoft.com

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

Ubisoft's latest adventure is making a great first impression

OK Ubisoft, I'm actually somewhat excited for *Assassin's Creed Shadows*. I honestly did not see that coming. When *Shadows* was announced, I was prepared to give it a big ol' shrug. Back then it was billed as the next "RPG" *Assassin's Creed* in the vein of *Odyssey* or *Valhalla*, which sounded like a regression from *Mirage*.

But since then, Ubi has been saying all the right things about *Shadows* to get a jaded, stealth-loving 'we peaked with Ezio' fan to wonder: are we back?

One of the protagonists, Naoe, is a shinobi with a hidden blade (cool). Its open-world Japan is smaller than *Valhalla*, but dense with cities and rooftops (OK, good stuff). There's a dynamic lighting system and a *Splinter Cell*-like visibility meter (yes, yes, keep talking). You can go prone to hide in low grass or find shortcuts through crawl spaces (amazing, say more). You can extinguish candles and snuff out lanterns from a distance to create shadows (perfect, no notes).

This was the stuff on my mind going into a six-hour *Shadows* play session at Ubisoft Quebec. It was largely a gameplay showcase: I played through part of each character's prologue, but not long enough to see Naoe and Yasuke meet, and one main questline in the Harima province, one of nine chunks of the map.

The idea behind *Shadows*' dual protagonists is ambitious, and not at all subtle. This is Ubisoft simulating two distinct videogame fantasies in a bid to satisfy two very different, almost opposing, types of AC fan: the old purists who want hoods, blades and creeds back, and the folks who love stepping into the boots of historical warrior archetypes, assassins be damned. What's remarkable is that Ubisoft might just pull it off.

YASUKE SHOVED HIM SO HARD HE WENT FLYING 20 FEET OFF A CLIFF

I had a blast infiltrating castles, bounding over rooftops, and disassembling guard patrols one stab at a time as Naoe. The dynamic lighting is just as cool as I hoped – that *Splinter Cell* visibility meter adds welcome complexity to sneaking. At night, compounds aren't just obstacle courses of hay bales and waist-high cover, but projections of hazardous light and malleable shadows charting a safe path to my goals.

My gut says *Shadows* is the strongest stealth package in 18 years of *Assassin's Creed*. But a bigger surprise was how much fun I also had charging barricaded doors, cleaving through unarmoured ronin and shrugging off glancing blows as *Shadows*' historical Black samurai.

DUAL FANTASIES

PLAYED IT

At times, controlling Naoe and Yasuke felt like playing two different action games. They share controls, quests, and combat fundamentals, but their toolsets forced me to look at the same obstacles from different angles. As Naoe I thrived on the rooftops, using her grapple hook to reach a vantage point, scout guard patrols, and map out a basic plan to get where I'm going. Her kit revolves around being a ghost – smoke bombs, noisemakers and a supply of kunai that can kill from a distance.

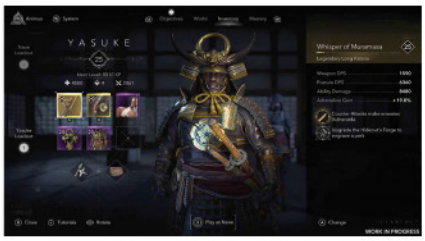
Yasuke is inherently reactive, by comparison. He's best played by barging into the action, maintaining the element of surprise just long enough to decapitate the biggest guy in the castle. I love the way Ubi makes Yasuke's height and muscle mass a genuine, gameplay-relevant asset – one time I sprinted up to a guard who hadn't seen me yet and Yasuke shoved him so hard he went flying 20 feet off a cliff. His light attacks slice through soldiers as if they're not even holding swords. Most attacks that I failed to block or dodge barely staggered him. One of Yasuke's cooldown abilities is this exaggerated kick that turns samurai into lethal projectiles.

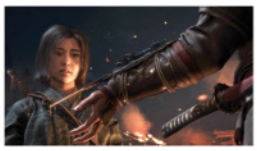
Assassin's Creed Shadows

RIGHT: My favourite weapon in Yasuke's arsenal is the Kanabo, a gigantic spiked club.

BELOW: My demo was locked to the region of Harima, a flourishing town overlooked by the imposing Himeji Castle.

If you want, you can always go loud with Yasuke's Teppo Rifle, essentially a musket.





I love that Naoe and Yasuke's playstyles are also defined by what they can't do. Naoe can glide over rooftops and parkour up towers, but those fodder enemies that are bugs on Yasuke's windshield are an actual problem for her when outnumbered. She can parry attacks, but can't just hold block like Yasuke, and with the mid-tier gear I was playing with, she could only withstand three or four hits before going down. I died or narrowly escaped every time I tried to fight more than three enemies at a time, and against heavily armoured samurai or brutes with big clubs, Naoe's margin for error is essentially zero. But those limitations are fun to work around. Got an area full of bad guys? Get creative with smoke bombs, use noise to isolate brutes, or maybe go around them instead.

Yasuke's limitations are more practical and often hilarious. The dude is an absolute tank in a fight, but a hopeless buffoon when a lighter touch is needed. The fully armoured samurai can crouch, take cover and technically stealth kill. He can sort of climb if a ledge is comfortably within his reach, and his wobbly stance on narrow ledges is best described as worrisome. At one point, I tried to haul Yasuke across a tightrope between two buildings. The rope immediately snapped under his weight, dropping the heavily armoured samurai into an embarrassing tumble in full view of guards. That's all amazing. There's a version of *Assassin's Creed Shadows* that could've taken the Ezio copout of making both characters good enough at fighting and stealth that who you play becomes arbitrary.

NO GODS, NO MASTERS

What I saw of *Shadows*' prologue is strong. Naoe's origins include clichés that this series can't seem to shake – a personal tragedy, dead family member who was secretly an assassin the whole time, the passing on of a hidden blade, a vow of revenge – but I'm interested to see Naoe and Yasuke's first encounter. Yasuke's introduction is a more interesting retelling of his real-life counterpart: we see him arrive in Kyoto as a slave of Jesuit priests, his encounter with daimyo Oda Nobunaga, and his recruitment to his services. By the time we're introduced to a cabal of masked killers who rule Japan's underground, you can see the Ubisoft open-world pieces snapping together: targets spread across the map just begging for a knife to the neck.

NAOE'S ORIGINS INCLUDE CLICHÉS THAT THIS SERIES CAN'T SEEM TO SHAKE

Taking after *Odyssey*, *Mirage* and a variety of other open world Ubi joints of the last few years, many objectives aren't immediately identified on *Shadows*' map. Instead, the game feeds you clues to find your target. You might know a person's description, or that the house you're looking for is in 'Harima' near a shrine.

It's simple, but I get a big kick out of turning boring GPS waypoints into immersive mini-investigations, especially because they help me learn landmarks and appreciate environmental details. There's an option to turn on traditional waypoints if that all sounds like the worst, but there's also a shortcut baked into the game loop. On the map screen, you can spend 'scouts' to reveal objectives in a small area. Seems like a nice compromise – you still have to follow the clues to find the general area on the map. Scouts are also in short supply at first, only replenish as time passes, and are also used to smuggle supplies out of compounds.

THE UNKNOWNS

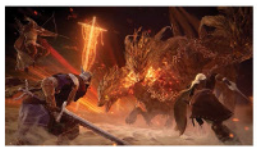
I didn't encounter many sidequests, but the few I did weren't very involved. One was a horseback archery competition, and another was to kill 25 ronin.

I'm also curious if the game's changing seasons will matter in the long run. The seasons changed once during my demo, from spring to summer. I didn't notice any ramifications, though maybe those mainly come when the lakes freeze in winter. I also hit a few bugs: one time I backflipped off a roof onto a bad guy and he didn't react at all, not even once I started killing him, and another time I climbed up to a synchronisation point only to slide off the eagle perched on top and die.

When a big game gets delayed twice, you never know how to read into it: a 'our game's great, but it'll be done when it's done' delay, or an 'we need to change everything' delay? Ubisoft has a lot riding on *Shadows*' success, so there's probably some panic involved, but what I played showed a level of confidence I haven't seen from the publisher in years. Six hours is a drop in the bucket of what's likely a 40-60 hour game, but I'm feeling a lot better two months ahead of *Shadows* than I did two months ahead of *Star Wars Outlaws*.

Morgan Park

Elden Ring Nightreign



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
May 30	FromSoftware	Bandai Namco	bandainamcoent.com

ELDEN RING NIGHTREIGN

Three hours with this helped me accept it's not co-op Elden Ring

E*lden Ring Nightreign* clicked the moment I hit level 2. My squad had just dropped into the game's remixed version of Limgrave. I was a bird man named Guardian, and all I had to know about Guardian is he's really good at blocking. We dropped 100 feet onto a camp of soldiers, sliced them up in seconds, and bee-lined toward a site of grace to level up.

The From Software levelling experience is one reason why I like *Souls* games, but don't love them. Agonising over where to dump points into stats to make meters slightly longer isn't my idea of satisfying progression, so when I touched a site of grace in *Nightreign* and watched my stats automatically increase according to my character's specialities, I thought, "This rules, and it's gonna piss some people off."

I hope I'm not dealing fatal psychic damage when I say that, structurally, *Elden Ring Nightreign* has more in common with *Fortnite* than *Elden Ring*. There's the battle royale-like closing circle, of course, but the flow is similar too. A full *Nightreign* run takes place over three in-game days. The daytime is one long looting phase: your squad runs around the map clearing mob camps, looting, killing lesser bosses, levelling and maybe solving the odd ten-second puzzle. At night you challenge a harder boss, and then the sun rises for the next day.

As someone who somehow clocked 106 hours in *Elden Ring* without seeing the credits, it's jarring to see where From has hacked away at its complexity to reconfigure the RPG into a run-based hack-and-slasher. Armour isn't a thing, enemies don't respawn when you die, there are no NPCs in Limgrave to chat up other than the occasional merchant, and there's little progression between runs. *Nightreign* breaks more *Souls* game rules than anything before it. In that way, this really does play like a super ambitious mod, and so far it's pretty good.

AT NIGHT YOU CHALLENGE A HARDER BOSS, AND THEN THE SUN RISES FOR THE NEXT DAY

PLAYED IT

BOSS RUSHED

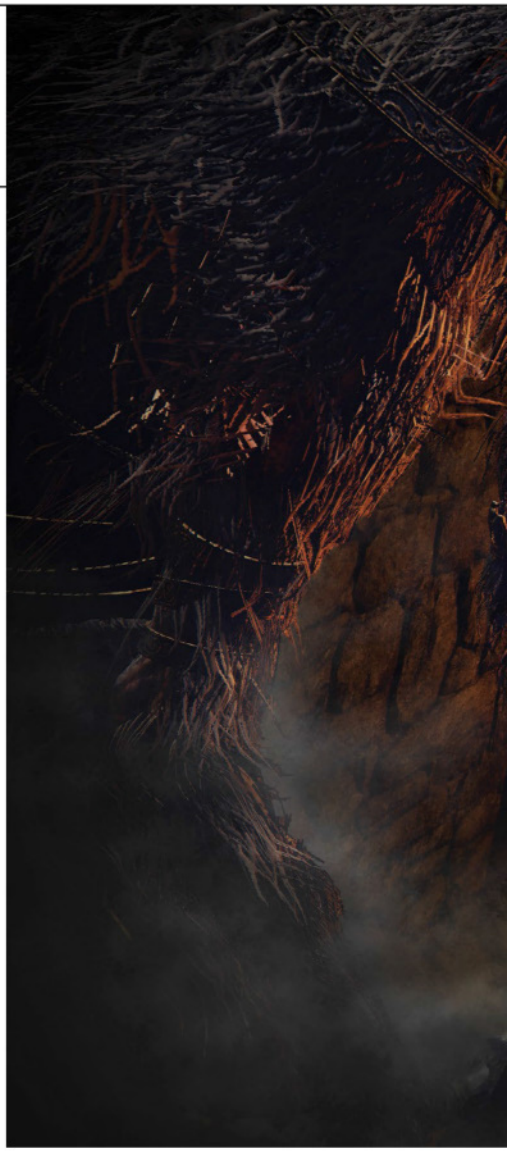
Build variety is bound to be *Nightreign*'s greatest strength as it pulls from an already deep pool of weapons, Ash of War skills, bosses and whatever new stuff director Junya Ishizaki's team has cooked up for the £40 standalone, and there's a thrill to its accelerated power curve. My GamesRadar friend (and dedicated *Souls* fan) Austin Wood was consistently finding some of the most powerful *Elden Ring* weapons on day one and two of a *Nightreign* run. By the time the sun set on day two, I felt more powerful and capable than I ever did in base *Elden Ring*.

I'm less convinced by the repeatability of *Nightreign*'s map. It's a remixed version of Limgrave with new structures and randomised elements – Bandai mentioned the full game will have a chance to spawn unique points of interest we didn't see, like a volcano in the middle of Limgrave – but ultimately, this is one map, not particularly huge, and too familiar to feel truly new.

At times, the circle was a real buzzkill. So much of *Nightreign* is about freedom and empowerment – the superhuman sprint speed, juiced weapon stats, overpowered ultimate abilities – but there's no time afforded to stop and smell the scarlet rot.

Which isn't to suggest a co-op, fleshed-out *Elden Ring* arcade mode is a bad idea – we had lots of fun in our short burst – but *Nightreign*'s fixation on pure combat and forward momentum is already showing its limits. The more efficient we got at wiping out mob camps, sprinting to the next one, and upgrading our flasks at churches, the more it felt like the majority of playing *Nightreign* is thwacking various loot piñatas with a stick until the real fun begins.

Morgan Park



ABOVE: "Stoopid humans. Always chests lured by. Now we FEED, brothers!"

LEFT: Just utilising a giant eagle to pop out to get the latest issue of PC Gamer magazine. As you do.

By Ian Evenden

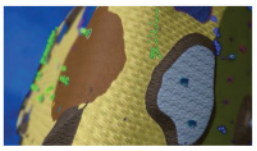
Once battle is joined, your floating irregular spheroid becomes a very busy place indeed.

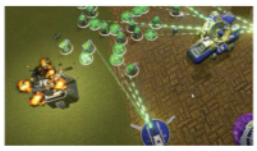
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBA	Tomáš Malý	Tomáš Malý	s.team/a/2369780

UNNATURAL WORLDS

A game that lives up to its name





Spinning the camera around a strange dumbbell-shaped world, more of an accretion of shapes than something that has achieved hydrostatic equilibrium, you can't help but marvel. Scientists wouldn't call this thing a planet, yet it has life on its surface, building structures and driving trucks, and it's spoiling for a fight.

PLAYED IT

The unnatural worlds of *Unnatural Worlds* are 3D objects with complex surfaces. Rather than the hex-pocked flat plains of many RTS games, here you've got uneven shapes floating in space. The graphics are simple, but there's enough to tell you what's going on, and when enemy units come crusading over a curve that blocks your view, blasting away at your buildings with weapons that leave dotted lines rather than plasma trails, things can get intense.

The game is designed in a way that tries to minimise micromanagement, concentrating instead on logistics and base building. When you start a game, you choose the planet and other players – whether they're real or AI – and are then dropped into an area with resource nodes, a single building, and some trucks. The trucks are autonomous, and will happily trundle around setting up whatever new structures you choose from a list at the side of the screen. These are divided into military and economic categories, and naturally you'll want to concentrate on building things that allow you to build more things. At least at first.

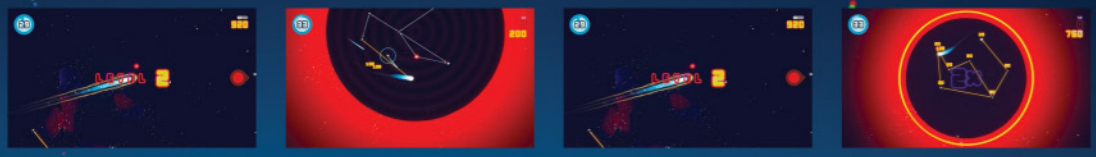
CALL OF UNNATURE

So once you've got drills set up over the resources, you'll want to stick a concrete plant, a generator and perhaps a laboratory nearby. The trucks find their own routes, so all you need to worry about is finding the optimum location for your buildings.

THE GRAPHICS ARE SURPRISINGLY DETAILED ONCE YOU ZOOM INTO THEM

Then a tiny rectangular block comes over the horizon and starts firing, and suddenly the military section of the build list starts to look more interesting. Pop down a factory and a vehicle assembler, and you can start churning out scout units and hovercraft that can go after the interlopers. Send them in the right general direction and they'll again look after themselves, the tiny explosions that are the result of a fight soon popping up across the visible section of the map.

The graphics are surprisingly detailed once you zoom into them, though much of the time you'll be zoomed out to a level at which it's hard to appreciate. Enemy walker units, your own trucks, and the piles of resources that accrue outside manufacturing plants give the game plenty of personality, but it's the irregularly shaped bodies the action takes place on that give it a unique visual identity and set it apart from other strategy titles. There's a demo on Steam.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2025	Steph Thirion	Annapurna Interactive	s.team/a/2831000

FARAWAY

Quite a long way over the hills

E*liss Infinity* was not a big PC gaming success, mainly because it was only released on mobile platforms back in 2014. Its mix of colour-based puzzles and multi-touch controls looks like it might fit the new generation of portable gaming PCs, but *Faraway*, from the same developer, is a bit more traditional.

It's certainly a minimal experience, as you control a shooting star that travels through the universe, attempting to create constellations as it passes through solar systems and empty expanses. Constantly in danger of vanishing in a puff of photons, the star must constantly pass close to others of its kind to harvest energy, and its quest to travel, to see what the infinite universe has to offer, leads to the point of light looping and doubling back on itself between stars to rack up score multipliers and keep going.

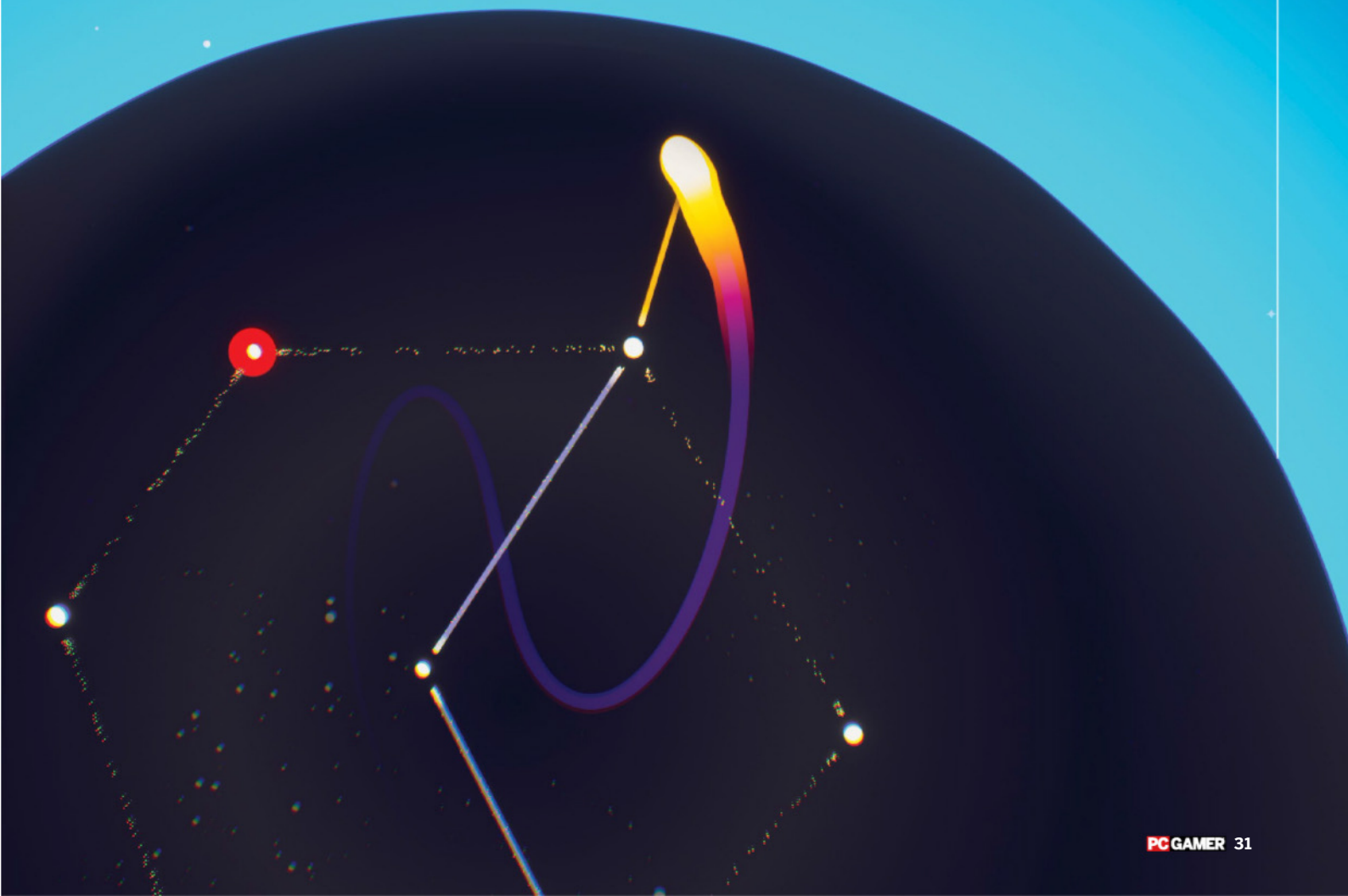
FIRST LOOK

STAR SPANGLED

It's undoubtedly a chill experience that wouldn't be out of place on an iPad. The star leaves an energy string behind it that connects dots together, leaving shapes etched on spacetime while a synth soundtrack soars in the background.

The game consists of 16 puzzle stages that teach the game mechanics, and a procedurally generated 'core mode' that starts every run afresh and reacts to players' abilities to allow experienced shooting stars to quickly catapult themselves to high scores. From the video released so far, it looks to be an immensely elegant game that promises hidden depths beyond just being a score attack made for repeated runs. That said, it's easy to imagine it being the kind of game that engenders a 'zone' state in players as they zip from star to star.

With developer Steph Thirion the lone designer, coder and musician behind the game, it would be rude to get too impatient about a release date, but on the basis of what's been revealed so far, the sooner we can be flinging our way between the stars in pursuit of ever higher scores, the better.



By Ian Evenden

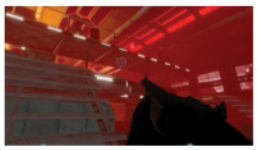
Corridors, zombies and strange floating ring-like things. We're home.

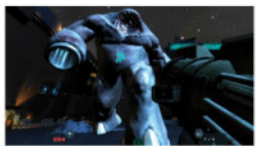
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
March 31	Madness Studio	Madness Studio	s.team/a/2204910

SLIPGATE

We're all doomed, Mr Freeman





Marine. Sci-fi base. Portals. Demons. Shotgun. Stop me if you've heard this one before. *Slipgate* even goes as far as to show its player character in a green suit of armour, and it's a classic retro shooter that's not afraid to show its influences. One of its melee weapons is even a crowbar.

FIRST LOOK

There's no id Tech or GoldSrc on show here, however. The game is made in the 15-year-old FPS Creator engine, which gives it a fully 3D mouselook that's reminiscent of *Quake* or *Half-Life*. It feels more modern than either, as the lighting and texturing is like a brighter *Doom 3* in feel (and there's even a flashlight for the darker places), though some of the level geometry is blocky and just as likely to funnel you down a claustrophobic corridor as bump you in an arena-like space and turn the lights out.

As you might expect from a game that recommends you use an RTX 3060 card (though it supports GPUs all the way down to the old GTX 580 from 2010) it runs extremely fast on modern PCs, and early enemies are very prone to explode when hit by shotgun shells, as you pick up the weapon very early on in the demo version, along with a quad damage pickup straight out of *Quake*. Human enemies go down easily, a pistol shot to the head usually enough to drop them, but the supernatural baddies that teleport in later in the demo are much tougher, with the shotgun proving its worth.

RUN AND GUN

Behind the shotgun is Jack 'Hammer' Thompson, the kind of fearless soldier you'd expect in this kind of situation.

EARLY ENEMIES ARE VERY PRONE TO EXPLODE WHEN HIT BY SHOTGUN SHELLS

It's just him and an arsenal of weapons against the end of the world, and he'd like to rescue his wife in the process. He's still human, though, and takes plenty of damage if he lets the clawing demons get close. Floating health packs and *Half-Life*-style wall-mounted health stations are both littered around the base, which displays an ironic 'no weapons beyond this point' sign at its reception desk, where you gun down the first of many possessed human adversaries. Naturally, there are plenty of weapons to be found, some of them rotating.

Madness Studio is based in Russia, where the team has been working together for 11 years. It has worked on *Doom*-based visual design projects in the past, and its members clearly harbour a love for old-school sci-fi shooters and '90s games in general. While *Slipgate* may struggle slightly in the originality department, it certainly nails the atmosphere and feel of an early 3D FPS, and given the popularity of the so-called boomer shooter, should slip neatly in with the current zeitgeist.

PRISMA

Say cheese

This 2D, singleplayer, turn-based indie JRPG has a distinctive look, but it's the way the game's visuals tie into the way that it plays that's the most interesting thing about it.

The game's protagonist is Alma, a photojournalist who finds something odd has happened to her camera. Instead of moaning about it online then taking it to be repaired, she decides to work with its newly discovered prism powers that allow her to shift perspectives and redirect attacks while on the battlefield. Her fisheye lens can send an attack around the back of a pack of enemies, potentially striking them in a weak spot, while a shattered lens (which sounds like an insurance claim to me) splits her attacks into multiple strikes, hitting multiple bad guys at once.

Ostensibly set in the modern world, Alma is able to enter an alternative dimension through portals, discovering a twisted version of the overworld. Her rivals there are alternative versions of herself, who have made different choices, and want to steal the prism shards that power her abilities.

FIRST LOOK

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBA	Dreams Uncorporated	Dreams Uncorporated	s.team/a/2850910

The tea-making machine looks just like the one at PC Gamer Towers.

FIRST LOOK

WANDERSTOP

Make tea, not war

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
March 11	Ivy Road	Annapurna Interactive	s.team/a/1299460

Running a tea shop in a magical forest sounds like one of the very best things to do in a videogame, and this cosy narrative title from devs who worked on games such as *The Stanley Parable* and *BioShock* sees you learning the stories of the travellers who pass through your shop, before brewing a tea that's perfect for them using what's described as an 'unusual contraption'. Intriguing.

Back to Basics
CODE NAME
PRIMITIVE

PRIMITIVE
GAME MODE & UPDATE
UPDATE OUT NOW
RUST

Life Swap

inZOI is readying up in all its ultra-realistic glory to be the first true rival The Sims series has ever had. *By Mollie Taylor*

AR
COMPA

As far as *Sims* competitors go, *inZOI* is doing something few others are managing to achieve: actually release. Krafton's take on the life simulator genre is the closest we've come to anything on the size and scope of EA's series, and the first game that could very well give *The Sims* a run for its money.

Despite that, *inZOI* director Hyungjun 'Kjun' Kim doesn't view his game as competition. "We see *inZOI* not as a competitor to *The Sims*, but rather as another option that fans of this genre can enjoy," he tells me. "We have great respect for the legacy *The Sims* has built over the years, since we know that reaching that much depth in such a short period of time is no easy task."

It's a noble stance to take, but that won't stop the life-sim sickos from holding the two next to each other, looking back and forth with one eye squinted to carefully examine every small detail and difference between them. With that aforementioned legacy of *The Sims*, *inZOI* needs to stand out. And boy, does it.

With its hyper-realistic graphics – which have seen people making scarily accurate virtual recreations of pop culture icons such as Billie Eilish and, er, Wallace of Wallace and Gromit fame – a seamless open world, AI-driven tools, and a more meta take on your relationship with your virtual families – the game actively acknowledges you as some sort of *inZOI* overlord, working from an office while managing these tiny people – it feels like a completely fresh take on the genre that could stand on its own two feet.

GET A LIFE

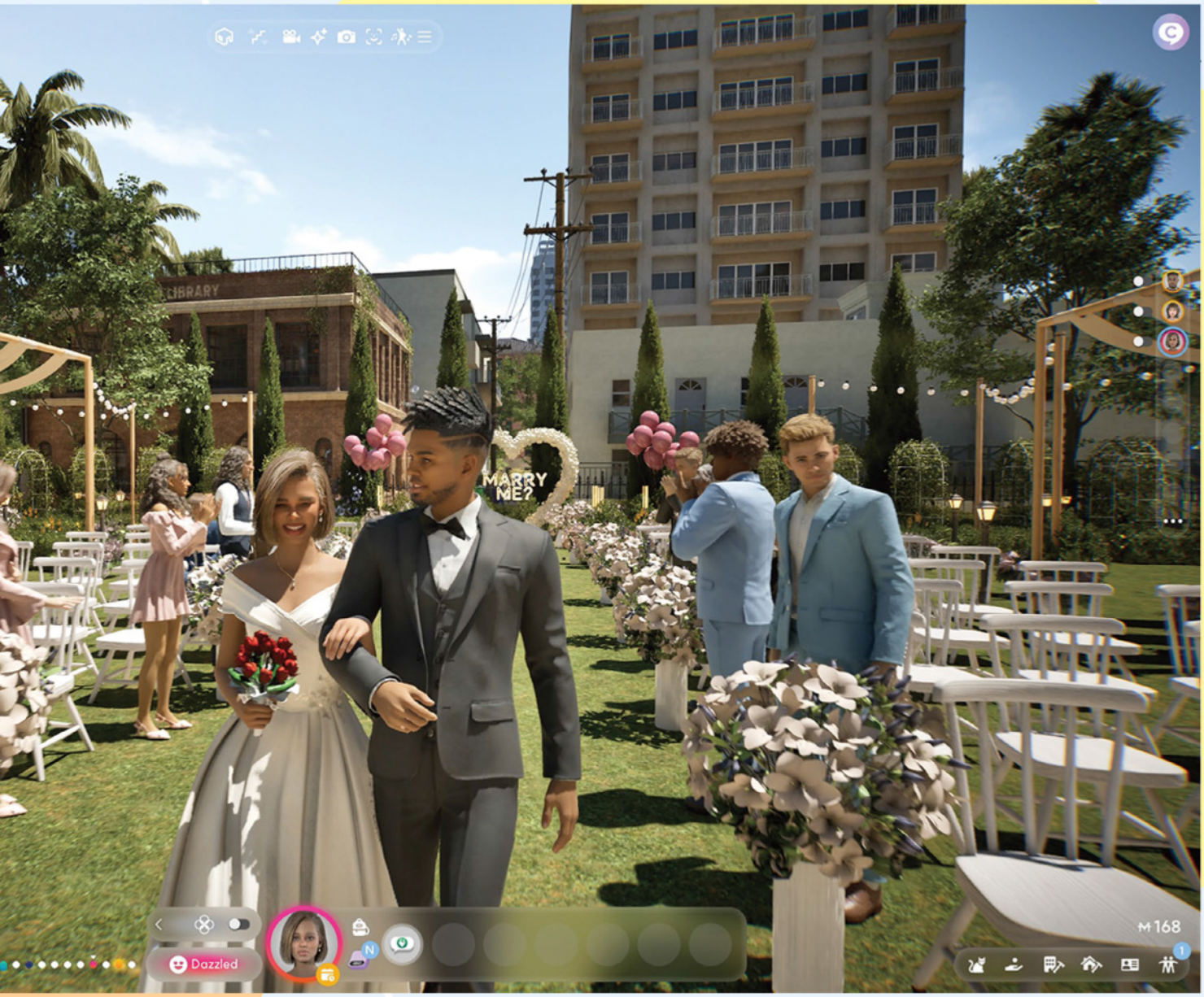
I'm more jazzed about some of these aspects than others, mind. The open world is by far the thing I'm most excited about. *inZOI* is set to launch with three different playable cities: there's the Korean-inspired Dowon, Bliss Bay which is loosely the US, and Indonesian-style Kucingku.

Each one looks to be pretty darn huge, and Kjun explained its unique appeal to me: "Within the game's city, 300 characters – known as Zois – interact with each other in real time, leading to a variety of events and narratives. This dynamic interaction allows players to enjoy a more vibrant and engaging experience," he says. That's a lot of people to be mingling at once, and I'm interested to see how all those moving parts actually play out.

Something I am, admittedly less jazzed about, is how all-in Kjun (and Krafton in general) seems to be going on AI. Its use in games continues to be a controversial topic, especially as the industry still tries to ascertain just how big an impact it's going to have on an increasingly volatile space when it comes to career stability. *inZOI* is stuffed with pockets of machine learning features, and Kjun is determined to focus on how he believes its implementation will elevate *inZOI*'s overall experience.

Zois will have as close to free will as we can give bundles of code

"In particular, the CPC (co-playable character) technology unveiled at CES 2025 further enhances the depth of the simulation," he says. "Unlike the traditional NPC, a CPC reacts dynamically to real-time situations and interactions that align with their innate traits" Also touted as a Smart Zoi, the feature has been created alongside Nvidia and uses a Small Language Model, and Kim tells me



they're "capable of more realistic interactions than is possible with traditional rule-based NPCs. They act freely based on their personalities and life experiences, elevating realism within the game overall."

That basically means that Smart Zois will probably have as close to free will as we can give bundles of code dressed up in fancy Unreal Engine 5 skinsuits. They might help someone lost with directions, or offer up food to a hungry stranger on the street. Their actions will cause them to adjust their daily schedule based on what they've done that day, their experiences shaping their choices in the following days.

OUTTA THE BAG

What's with inZOI's furry friend?

WHO?
Did you know the adorable fluffy white, blue-eyed cat you've seen all over *inZOI*'s marketing actually has a name? It's Psycat.

HOW?
Er, that one I don't know. But Krafton says Psycat plays a pivotal role in *inZOI*, holding the technology that allows us to control the cities and their Zoi inhabitants.

WHAT?
Psycat is much more than a cute cat, though. Turns out he's actually your boss at AR Company, the workplace you're interning at.

ABOVE: Social events come with their own special cutscenes.

FAR LEFT: That guy looks how I feel when someone's in my personal space.

Smart Zois will be a toggleable feature and, presumably, pretty damn taxing on our machines. As a result, Kjun mentions that only "players whose GPUs meet the necessary specifications" will be able to utilise the feature during Early Access.

On paper, I will admit that the concept of Smart Zois is pretty enticing. Finding new and interesting ways to make my tiny virtual people unpredictable and dynamic is no small task, and I am intrigued by how well it'll work in practice.

It's not the only implementation of AI that Kjun and his team have stuffed into *inZOI*. There's also the 3D Printer feature, which lets players snap a photo of an object and then feed it to the game, which'll turn it into an in-game 3D model. It really sounds like one of those "too good to be true" features, and Kjun largely skirted any discussion around it in favour of focusing on the Smart Zois.

But if it works properly, it could be a fantastic gateway to creating bespoke furniture pieces, or bringing

a real-life space into the virtual world. Custom textures can be uploaded, and I could fix one of the life sim's greatest weak spots: having almost no decent rug options. Kjun told me back in August that the team had been training the 3D Printer feature on items around the office, and since then I've been curious whether the mode has seeped into their own asset creation.

"*inZOI* offers a variety of AI-powered creative tools designed for players," Kjun says. "However, AI has not been directly used for generating in-game assets. Our goal is for *inZOI*'s AI features to become accessible, valuable tools that empower creators to bring their ideas to life with ease and efficiency."

Kjun's words put me a little at ease, at least. After all, community-created content has long been a core pillar of life sims, and finding ways to broaden that accessibility has the potential to be a really good thing.

TELLING TALES

I mean, community is key in any good videogame circle, but it feels even more important when it comes to life sims. We're the ones crafting each character, their past, present and their future. We're the architectural designers, building intricate residential and commercial properties in service of whatever storyline we're pushing at that moment. Developers like Krafton are giving us the building blocks, sure,

but it's largely up to us to make something out of them.

That's something I've always loved about life sims. They can be played in all sorts of different ways – you could talk to ten different people, and they would all have their own unique way of life simming. Reaching that sort of scope where you're covering everyone's needs at once isn't exactly something you're going to achieve out of the gate, and I wanted to know what Kjun's priorities were while creating *inZOI*.

"inZOI aims to provide a platform where players can tell their own stories"

"inZOI aims to provide a platform where players can tell their own unique stories," Kjun says. "To achieve this, we have focused heavily on developing customisation systems for buildings and characters, allowing anyone to design the environment and characters according to their preference." Sounds pretty standard right now, but my curiosity piqued at what Kjun has to say next: "Additionally, we incorporated a variety of community simulation systems that can enrich the storytelling experience, such as rumours, trends, diseases, etc."

Sorry, diseases? Trends? Rumours? It's sounding salacious in

all the best ways, and I'm curious to know in particular just how something like diseases will work. Can they transmit from Zoi to Zoi? Even cause death? Kjun doesn't go into any detail on how exactly these things will work, but I'm already conjuring up all sorts of virtual pandemic and post-apocalyptic scenarios that could be cooked with a little bit of disease spreading.

Admittedly, I've always been a builder rather than a storyteller, but I'm already excited at what *inZOI*'s different tools could bring to the table. As Kjun tells me, there are all sorts of knobs and buttons I can twist or push to tweak day-to-day behaviour or even how regularly certain disasters occur.

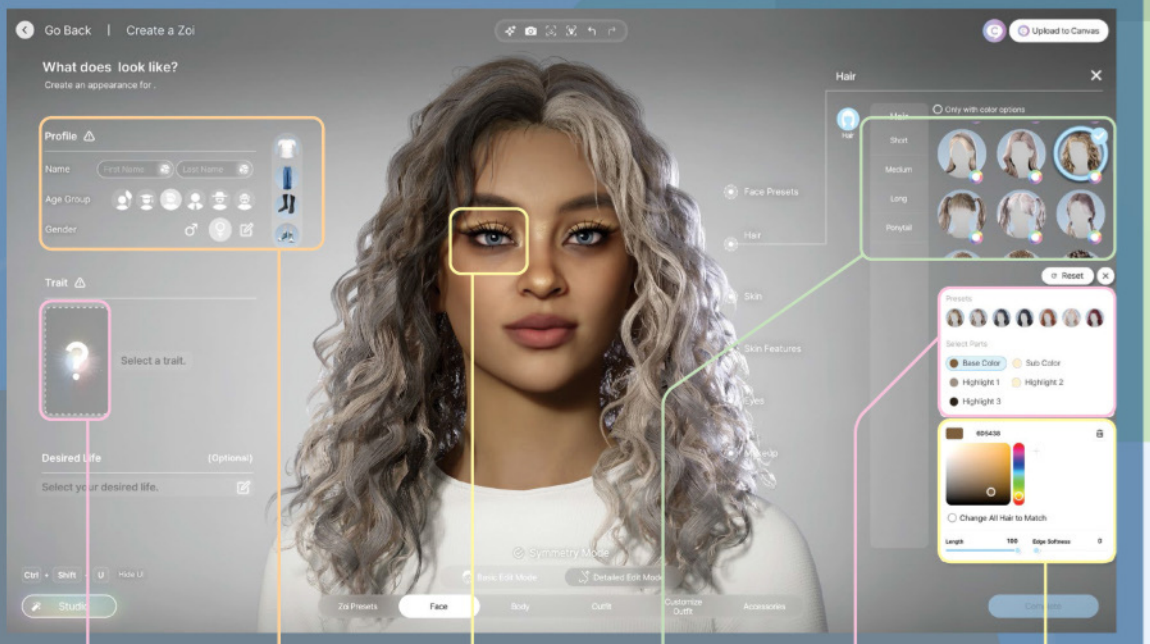
One thing I've been particularly interested in, since first hearing about it back at last year's Gamescom, is *inZOI*'s Karma system. I like a good morality meter in my RPGs – your *Mass Effect*s and *Fable*s and whatnot – but I've never thought much about what having one in a life sim would be like. It's certainly one of the more unique features that *inZOI* is touting, and I was desperate to have Kjun explain it to me more. "The Karma system represents the law of cause and effect, where actions influence both the present and the future. Each time a Zoi performs an action, karma points are accumulated."

Sounds simple enough so far, but here's where things get taken up a notch. "Upon death, a Karma evaluation determines the state of the soul," Kjun continues. "If the score is too low, the Zoi becomes a ghost and must redeem their Karma points before they can transition into a new life. If too many ghosts appear in the city, new Zois cannot be born, nor can families be created, placing the responsibility on players to manage the Karma of Zois within the city."

But unlike how I inevitably play all my RPGs – being a little snot-nosed goody two-shoes – Kjun doesn't want the Karma system to

FACE PAINT

A closer look at inZOI's character creator



TRAITS
inZOI has 18 traits to choose from, with each one influencing what Zois value in life, how they tackle their emotions and needs.

PROFILE
Give your Zoi the perfect moniker and choose from one of six age groups. You can also customise their gender identity, if you like.

SCULPTING
Drag, rotate and scale across points on your Zois face – don't forget to turn off symmetry mode if you want to create unique appearances.

CHOICES
inZOI is stuffed with customisation options with multitudes of hairstyles, nail designs, accessories and T-shirts.

HIGHLIGHTS
Style one hair a hundred different ways thanks to *inZOI*'s in-depth colour system. Add highlights, colour and panelling.

COLOURS
inZOI has a palette you can use across every customisation option. Random numbers and letters never made me so happy.

boil down to one of two paths. "This system is not intended to enforce only 'good' actions and restrict 'bad' ones," he said. "Life cannot be divided simply into good and bad; every life has its own meaning and value. We aimed to convey the message that life, in all forms, is significant. If we compare life to school, everything that happens within it is a lesson learned and a step towards progress."

Kjun explained that it's yet another tool in the storyteller's toolbox and added, "It would be immensely rewarding if players could use *inZOI*'s Karma system to create diverse events and stories, while exploring the many meanings of life."

There's also numerous sliders that can be adjusted thanks to *inZOI*'s City Edit feature. Kjun explained that these will directly manipulate the simulation itself, "Such as relationships, city cleanliness, fire occurrence rates, public safety, population size and number of vehicles." Want a Gotham-style city of corruption and crime? Bump those fires right up and that public safety right down. If you're more of a utopia creator, you can scale everything nicely to fit that vision.

"Each factor can be set across 11 levels, with the intensity of the setting resulting in either dramatic or subtle changes," Kjun tells me. I couldn't help but be curious about just how noticeable something like this would be. As such tweaking of the city's moving parts feels like a massive undertaking, something which Kjun seems all too aware of.

"Due to the nature of the life sim genre, results are influenced by other variables, making it unlikely to see 100% immediate or perfect outcomes. However, players will experience gradual changes as they tweak the sliders, adding depth and realism to the gameplay."

ABOVE: Take me to the alternate universe where cats are the ones running global tech companies instead.

"We aimed to convey the message that life, in all forms, is significant"

TONAL SHIFTS

From Kjun's numerous interviews throughout *inZOI*'s development, as well as our own, I do get the sense that he's a rather philosophical person. He compared the game to a child being raised by its parents when he had to announce its delay back in November 2024, writing: "It is said that among primates, raising a human child to adulthood takes the longest time because humans must be prepared to endure and adapt to their ever-changing surroundings. The extra love and care that is required to properly nurture a child is how I see our journey with *inZOI* – a game that we will be nurturing together from its Early Access birth."

I have to wonder if that gnawing curiosity in humans and their behaviour is why Kjun has made what I consider to be quite the significant leap from toiling away on MMOs to tackling one of the most notoriously complex and enigmatic genres that exist.

After all, there were dozens of paths Kjun could have taken

following his two decades working across MMORPGs. Why life sims? "This is a genre I've enjoyed for a long time, especially since I have a wealth of memories playing these games with my son," he says.

"My son asked me why there aren't more games like the ones we enjoyed together. That made me realise the need for something new in this genre – something that fans like us could cherish and enjoy for years. While working on such an unfamiliar genre has been a challenge, it has been a rewarding journey filled with new experiences every day."

While the huge genre shift has been "a new frontier" for Kjun, his wealth of experience with MMOs has surprisingly more transferable skills than I'd expect. "My experience in creating vast maps and intricate items for MMORPGs has been incredibly valuable in developing *inZOI*," he explains. "Designing and implementing expansive worlds is a core aspect of MMORPGs, and this expertise allowed me to effectively design the open world of *inZOI*."

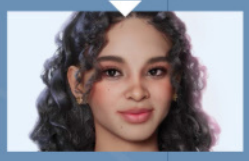
It also, as it turns out, has come in real handy for *inZOI*'s very well-received character creator. "My background in developing character customisation, architectural elements and features like housing in MMORPGs played a crucial role in addressing these needs efficiently. Furthermore, my experience in designing NPC systems as well as interactions between players and NPCs in MMORPGs provided significant inspiration for developing *inZOI*'s NPCs and interaction systems. Although the two genres are different, I found it fascinating that they share these similarities in building expansive worlds"

NEW FACE

Thinking about the similarities between the two, it hadn't occurred to me before just how big a role character customisation plays in both MMORPGs and life sims. They're the main vessel for everything that occurs in both genres, and often virtual avatars that we pour a little bit of ourselves into.

SIM-ILARITIES

How do inZOI and The Sims 4 compare?



INZOI

THE SIMS

FEATURES

INZOI	THE SIMS
AI-driven NPCs and furniture creation, morality system, custom textures, mods.	A unique, unmatchable sense of humour, user-content gallery, existing playerbase.

CHARACTERS

INZOI	THE SIMS
Hyper-realistic style, colour picker, customisable identities, option for mods.	Cartoon style, preset swatches, eight life stages, paranormal and occult characters.

ENVIRONMENT

INZOI	THE SIMS
Three maps to choose from, each one offering a seamless open world.	Smaller worlds with loading screens, with three offerings in the base game.

STORY

INZOI	THE SIMS
'Choose Your Own Adventure' with you playing the role of an office worker.	Another CYOA flavour, with lots of fleshed-out NPC lore and the Neighbourhood Stories.

What we've seen of *inZOI*'s character creator so far is, to be frank, pretty freaking impressive. While I'm still not completely sold on those ultra-realistic graphics yet, it's hard to deny just how good the game looks. Krafton unleashed the character creator to the masses, very briefly, back in August last year, and people went wild with it.

From terrifyingly accurate celebrity recreations to Instagram model-level of beautiful people, I was curious how Kjun and the team felt about the initial reaction to the character creator as well as the Canvas, which allows players to share their creations with the world.

"Honestly, before launching Canvas, we were concerned about whether it would gain much traction among players. However, I thought back to my experience with *Aion* about 15 years ago, when players actively shared their custom characters on community boards and found joy in doing so," Kjun says.

"This past August, I was thrilled to see Canvas receive so much attention and affection from players. While we anticipated that *inZOI*'s detailed customisation features and realistic graphics would inspire players to create unique and diverse outcomes, the results far exceeded our expectations."

I specifically mention Billie Eilish, who became one of the most popular recreations in the Canvas gallery during *inZOI*'s brief character creator demo, to Kjun. "I was especially amazed by some of these creations, including Billie Eilish," he says. "It made me wonder how exciting it would've been if Billie Eilish saw it and reacted to it!"

It seems like since that August demo, Krafton has been making even more improvements to the creator, too. "In the upcoming Early Access in March, additional features such as moles, freckles, scars and tattoos, as well as accessories like rings and watches will be introduced," Kjun reveals, then adds: "I'm already excited at the thought of seeing the incredible creations players will bring to life this time around!"

Despite my long-time love for life sims, my creativity levels have long paled in comparison to what so many others are able to conjure up and the sheer dedication folk have to this genre, a thought which Kjun echoes. "One of the most fascinating aspects of developing *inZOI* has been the enthusiastic reactions and feedback from fans of the genre," he says. "It was eye-opening to realise just how many people deeply love this type of game. The immense anticipation and valuable input we've received from players have been a tremendous source of motivation throughout the development process."

When I ask what he was most looking forward to once the game finally launches, he tells me it is "continuing to communicate with players in creating the game together. While there may still be areas for improvement, we want to release the game through Early Access and actively incorporate players' feedback to make *inZOI* even more enjoyable".

Kjun can't help but let his psychological self run off in thought as we come to the end of our interview. "Beyond simply creating a successful and beloved game, we hope that *inZOI* will bring comfort to many players' lives," he says. "As the saying goes, 'Life is a tragedy when seen up close, but a comedy when viewed from a distance.' We believe that observing life from a broader perspective can help us enjoy it more. Through *inZOI*, we hope players will experience diverse lives, explore various scenarios, and enjoy life as if it were a playground. Most importantly, we sincerely hope these experiences can bring players strength and solace in their real life as well." *inZOI* is set to release into Early Access on March 28, 2025. ■

What we've seen of inZOI's character creator so far is pretty impressive

PC GAMER

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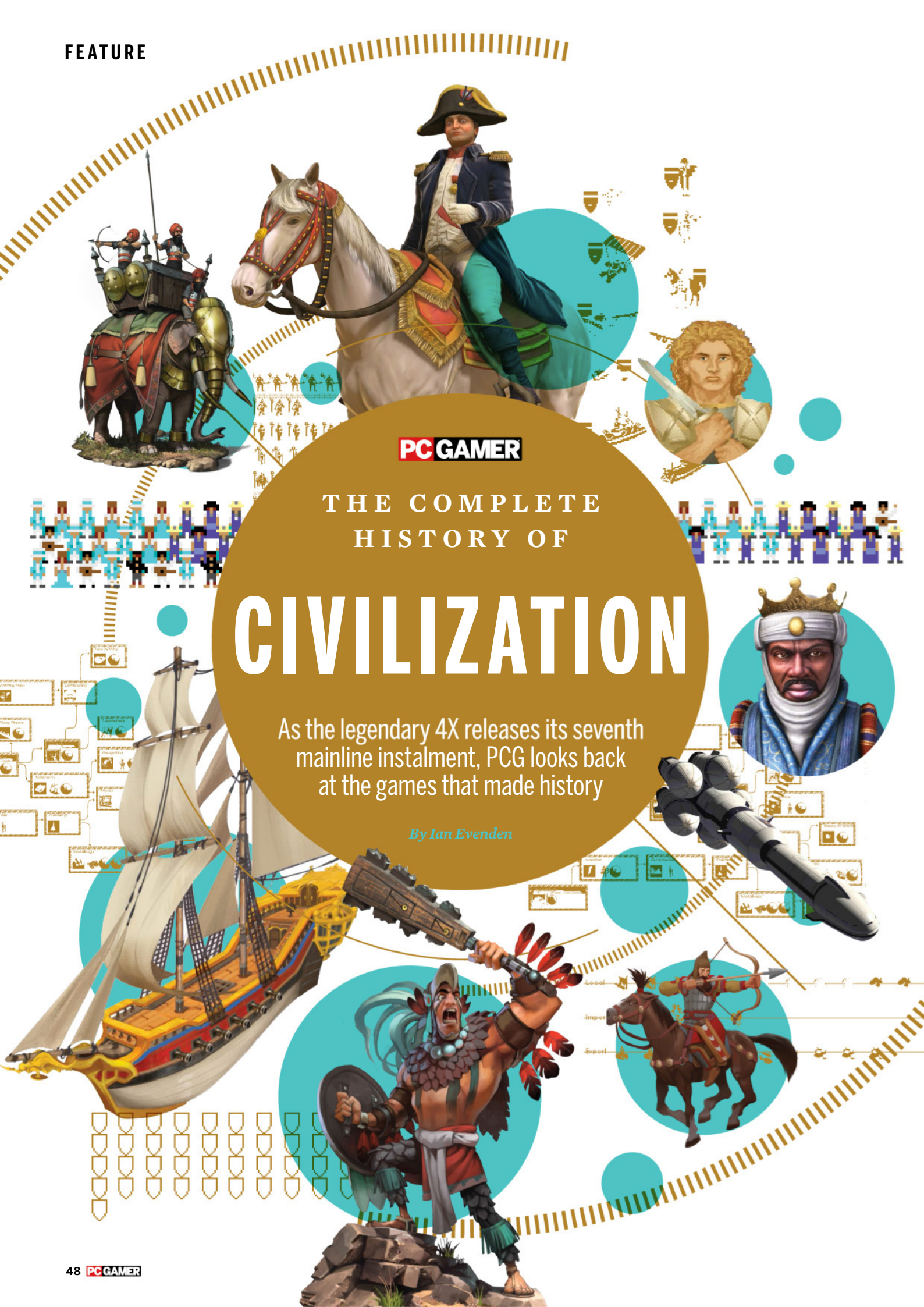


PC GAMER

THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF CIVILIZATION

As the legendary 4X releases its seventh mainline instalment, PCG looks back at the games that made history

By Ian Evenden

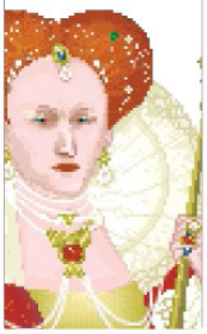
RELEASED 1991 DEVELOPER MicroProse

Sid Meier's Civilization

The dawning of a new age

1 **The original. Developed for PCs running MS-DOS, but ported to other platforms such as the Amiga, SNES and PlayStation, *Civilization* came after *SimCity*, *Railroad Tycoon* and *Populous* but produced something arguably deeper and with longer-lasting influence. Designer Sid Meier was a co-founder of Microprose, and had been working on 2D action platformers and flight sims such as 1985's *F-15 Strike Eagle*, but felt that videogames didn't have to be wholly about destroying things.**

So we got something that cast the player as a great historical leader, from a choice of 15 (largely a cosmetic choice in this game), starting in 4000BC and building toward win conditions including launching a voyage to Alpha Centauri (an idea that birthed spin-off *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri*), scoring the most points before the year 2100, or destroying every other civilisation on the map.



Though crude by today's standards, these multiple victory conditions have become a hallmark of the series and the entire 4X genre, along with its turn-based nature, grid-delineated map, and micromanagement of cities and units to find the best path to success.

Civilization can also claim to have introduced the concept of the tech tree to games – and this is the primary way in which your civilisation can grow. Winning an arms race to get a new technology on the battlefield is a fast way to conquer more territory, but you can still defend using existing units dug into your cities – a bronze age phalanx fighting off a battleship may look comical, but it's effective.

PC Gamer didn't exist in 1991, but *Civilization* went down well in reviews from other publications, and has topped lists of the greatest and most influential games ever since, including a 1994 PCG US list of the top 40 PC games that placed it in second place after *Doom* and ahead of *Railroad Tycoon*, *Populous* and *SimCity 2000*.

The popular story about peace-loving Gandhi launching nukes after an integer overflow bug set his aggression level to 10 is an urban myth, but has been added to subsequent games in the series, starting with *Civ V*, as an Easter egg.

RELEASED 1996 DEVELOPER MicroProse

Sid Meier's Civilization II

Evolution, not revolution

2 Despite keeping the originator's name in its title, *Civ II* was designed by multiple people, including Brian Reynolds who would go on to co-found Firaxis (with Meier and Jeff Briggs, *Civ I* writer and composer) and Big Huge Games.

The new game switched to an isometric presentation from the old top-down view, and expanded on the original rather than attempting to reinvent it. So while you now have 23 nations, diplomatic reputations and a rebalancing to take the focus off military victory, plus mod support and a map editor in the PC version, the target of getting to our nearest neighbouring star remained.

RELEASED 2001 DEVELOPER Firaxis

Sid Meier's Civilization III

A cultural victory

3 Firaxis Games took us back to 4000BC again for the third mainline *Civ* title, and while the number of playable leaders dropped to 16 (and the timeline got 50 years lopped off, ending in 2050), they received new ways to govern – with a rather worrying variant of fascism introduced in the *Conquests* expansion pack that made workers 200% efficient, presumably out of fear – and unique units such as America's F-15s and India's war elephants. The biggest addition, however, was probably the concept of culture, which defines how much a city influences its surroundings, projecting this soft power across borders and causing enemy cities to join you if your rating is high.

RELEASED 2005 DEVELOPER Firaxis

Sid Meier's Civilization IV

Big changes across the map

4

Under lead designer Soren Johnson (*Old World*, *Offworld Trading Company*, *Spore*), *Civilization* got a thorough overhaul that included a new 3D graphics engine and a voiceover from Leonard Nimoy.

Of course, there was a bit more than that, but *Civ IV*'s new look, its animations, and the way the new engine made zooming in and out smoother and easier, hid some complete reworkings of *Civ*'s mechanics. Units had their attack and defence stats merged, but new specialisms meant there was a lot more to placing soldiers than just using the ones with bigger numbers. Cities lost their pollution scores, but gained a City Health rating that could be coaxed upward by adding improvements and sending in food resources or even just fresh water. Systems of governance can be customised with civic options, so you can introduce free market reforms to your iron-handed communism, but you'll have to research them first.

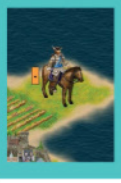
And the list of additions goes on. Religion is a newly expanded idea here, making your citizens happier if you build the right kind of temple, giving you diplomatic bonuses, and if you're lucky enough to found a religion and control its holy city, you get further divine bounty, though there is no religion-specific victory condition. Units can now gain experience and receive promotions, and some civs get a choice of leaders, each with differing traits, while 'great people' such as scientists, artists and merchants circulate within your population, potentially starting golden ages.

The tech tree, the solid trunk around which the games have always grown, loses its defined eras in this release, so you can potentially gain advancements really early if you work hard enough. The map editor remains, but the game now also includes extra multiplayer modes that have led to the game retaining its popularity.

HUGE MODERNISATION

Civ IV is a huge modernisation of a successful formula, and it was received as such. Following a 94% review in PC Gamer (also winning the Best Turn-Based Strategy award in 2005's PCG US awards issue, and gaining nominations in Best Multiplayer Game and Best Game), it received top marks across the board. Time magazine put it at number 11 in its 2016 Best Video Games of All Time list, and it became the first videogame to win a Grammy, the 2009 Best Instrumental Arrangement Accompanying Vocalist(s) award for its song Baba Yetu, composed for the game but also appearing on composer Christopher Tin's Calling All Dawns album.

IF YOU LIKE THIS YOU'LL LOVE...



FreeCol

Yep, it's a free game based on *Colonization*. It runs in Java, but still gets updates. freecol.org

RELEASED 2010 DEVELOPER Firaxis

Sid Meier's Civilization V

The joy of hex

5

Having hexagonal tiles instead of square ones is a clue that things have changed once again behind the scenes in *Civ V*, and this release sees another new engine for the series. There's a new designer too, John Shafer, who had worked on *Civ IV* expansions and would go on to work for Stardock and Paradox, releasing *At The Gates* in 2019 from his own studio, Conifer Games.

The fifth game in the series also brings city-states to the game, competing with you for resources while making no attempt to win. There are also research agreements between leaders, and a change to combat thanks to the removal of unit-stacking – the so-called stack of doom that could see whole armies placed on the same tile. This was potentially lethal for your opponents, but you had to be sure they didn't have artillery that could chip away at all of them at once.

RELEASED 2016 DEVELOPER Firaxis

Sid Meier's Civilization VI

War and peace

6 With designer Ed Beach now at the helm, who stays on for *Civilization VII*, and Sean Bean on voiceover duty (who doesn't), *Civ VI* keeps the hexes from the previous game but does its best to hide them under some seamless scenery. The game also gets the religious victory condition missing from previous entries, handing you the win if you can convert 50% of every other civilisation's cities to your way of seeing things. You just have to watch out for holy wars started by rival faiths.

The game also co-opts the Great Works mechanic from *Civ V*'s *Brave New World* expansion.

YOU JUST HAVE TO WATCH OUT FOR HOLY WARS STARTED BY RIVAL FAITHS

IF YOU LIKE THIS YOU'LL LOVE...

OpenTTD

An open-source city sim based on *Transport Tycoon Deluxe*. It's on version 14, and work is ongoing.

DEVELOPER Q&A

LINDSAY RIEHL

Firaxis' chief of staff on Civ's development

Lindsay Riehl was director of production on *Civs VI* and *VII*, and has also worked at Zynga and Kalypso Media. We spoke to her about her experiences with *Civilization* through the ages.

How did you come to work on the *Civilization* series?

I joined MicroProse in 1987 to work on a newly formed sports label. MicroProse's bread and butter at the time were flight and military simulations and they were interested in diversifying their portfolio and exploring other genres of games. After great success with *F-15 Strike Eagle* and *F-19 Stealth Fighter*, Sid [Meier] began focusing on strategy games and topics that he was passionate about and had always interested him – *Pirates!* and *Railroad Tycoon* were born!

Fortunately for me, I was moved to the adventure/strategy label because our sports games were not as successful! Next up for the strategy label was *Sid Meier's Civilization*, and I was part of the team to market and launch the original game.

I stayed at MicroProse after they were purchased by Spectrum Holobyte as the marketing manager on *Sid Meier's Civilization II*. At the time *Civ II* was set to launch, Spectrum Holobyte was solely focused on their Top Gun licence and did not put a lot of support behind *Civilization II*. The game launched and the *Civ* fan base and community propelled the game to the top of the sales charts. During this time I formed strong working relationships with Brian Reynolds [lead designer], Jeff Briggs [composer and producer] and Sid Meier, the founders of Firaxis.

What does a chief of staff do?

My day to day job is to be the producer of our executive leadership team and ensure we prioritise, align and drive forward strategic initiatives to meet our studio goals. There is a lot of change in the industry and while Firaxis has been around for almost 29 years, we too have to evolve with changing consumer demands and industry trends. I also do some special projects, help where needed and general cat herding! There is never a dull moment.

What jobs did you do at Firaxis before becoming chief of staff?

I was originally brought on as the director of marketing shortly after Firaxis was founded in 1996. When Firaxis was formed, we were an independent studio with a multi-publisher business model. At this time, it was considered unusual for a developer to have a dedicated marketing person on staff, and I got to pitch our titles to publishers, and champion the vision and passion for our games and studio. I left Firaxis when it was purchased by Take-Two, and worked in design production for Zynga's Facebook titles, *Cityville 2* and *FrontierVille*. I also helped set up a US publishing arm for Kalypso Media, a German-based company, to promote and publish *Tropico 3* in the US.

I happily reunited with Firaxis in 2013 as Director of Marketing. I was asked to build Firaxis' profile as a dual-franchise studio and look for opportunities for Firaxis to connect directly with our fans. I'm very proud that my team established a livestream studio that has grown into a state-of-the-art facility and created the first ever Firaxicon for our fans – I'm still hoping to bring that back one day!

In 2018, I took the director of production role and worked with the teams to develop *Civilization VI*, *Civilization VII* and *Marvel's Midnight Suns*. Heather Hazen, studio head and president of Firaxis, saw a need for a chief of staff role at our studio as we continue to grow and evolve to meet the needs of our players and our industry. I believe my experience

DEV PROFILE

Lindsay Riehl

Chief of staff, Firaxis

Lindsay Riehl has credits on games from *Rex Nebular and the Cosmic Gender Bender* (1992) up to *Midnight Suns* and *Civilization VII*.

BELOW LEFT: F-19 *Stealth Fighter* was the best game about a plane that doesn't exist (or does it?).

BELOW: *Civ I* may look crude by today's standards, but still plays well.

wearing multiple hats and being closely connected to the origin and heritage of Firaxis and our franchises helped me transition to the role.

Did you ever think that the *Civilization* series would still be going more than 30 years later?
Given our incredible fan base, I'm not surprised. Sid and *Civilization* have touched and had a positive impact on so many people's lives! But it wasn't a given that the game would continue for 30 years. When Firaxis was formed, they did not own the rights to *Civilization* and instead started work on *Alpha Centauri* and *Gettysburg*.

In 2000 Firaxis inked a deal with Hasbro/Infogrames, who purchased the rights from Spectrum Holobyte, and we began *Civilization III*.

Firaxis was later acquired by Take-Two, which then acquired the licence from Infogrames. In 2004, Sid, Firaxis and *Civilization* were happily reunited again!

What has been your favourite addition to the game?
I think *Civ VI*'s *Gathering Storm* expansion added an innovative and fun twist to playing *Civ*. It presented a spontaneous random event system that created unique challenges your civ needed to solve for. Also, you could use technologies to help mitigate floods and other disasters. It added a real-world element to *Civ* that I always thought was cool. I'm also super excited about *Civilization VII*'s multiplayer. More players will be able to play with each other through cross-platform cross-play, connecting our audiences together like never before.

How has the team changed in the course of making seven games (and all the spinoffs)?
A lot has changed for our teams. Supporting multiple platforms and technologies has changed the way we develop the game. *Civilization* is a global phenomenon, so a growing area for us is bringing in regional experts and subject matter experts to provide authentic representation and fun, historical context for different and diverse cultures, leaders and civs to our players. You can see that in our partnership with the Shawnee in *Civilization VII*.

It's always been important to the teams to integrate player feedback into our designs. That loop moves so much more quickly now and we have evolved to bring on teams and expertise to support that ongoing conversation with the community and ensure we are always delivering high-quality content.

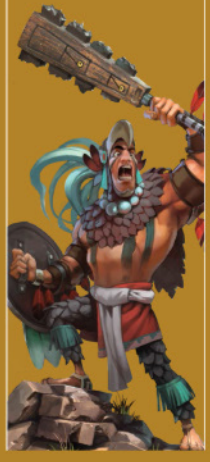
Do you have a favourite *Civilization* release, and do you still play it?
I'm more of a casual gamer and [console spin-off] *Civilization Revolution* is the *Civ* I spent the most time with. The irony is that I wasn't working at Firaxis when it was made; I played while I was working for Kalypso because we were researching what we considered the industry standard for strategy on Xbox 360, prepping for the launch of *Tropico 3*.

"I CAN'T IMAGINE FIRAXIS WITHOUT SID IN THE BUILDING"

Is there a memory from playing the game that sticks with you?
I was playing *Civ Rev* and my son, who played *Madden* and *Call of Duty* pretty much exclusively at the time, picked it up. The next thing I knew it was past midnight and he had to be up for school the next day. It's another story of just 'one more turn'.

Is there a leader in the game who you want to see dominate the map?
Catherine the Great! Always!

Do you still see Sid Meier around the office?
Sid is a constant at Firaxis – he is in the office just about every day working on new prototypes. He also works with the teams to rapidly prototype ideas and new systems that they want to try out in game. I can't imagine Firaxis without Sid in the building! ■



ABOVE: Catapult vs tank: a classic *Civ* stand-off.

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Utterly broken or offensively bad; no value.
Example *Big Brother, Mad Dog McCree*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Skull Island: Rise of Kong, ShellShock: Nam '67*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Underworld Ascendant, Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort.
Examples *Sonic: Lost World, Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III, Redfall, Lego Horizon Adventures*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed especially well.
Examples *Minecraft Legends, Senua's Saga: Hellblade II*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *New World, Skull and Bones, Forspoken*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Deep Rock Galactic, Star Wars Outlaws*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments. We love it.
Examples *Age of Wonders 4, Helldivers II*

90%-94% Important to PC gaming and ahead of its time.
Examples *Elden Ring, Factorio, Balatro*

95%-98% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Baldur's Gate 3, Minecraft, Metaphor: ReFantazio*

99%-100% Advances the human species. Provides a feeling not dissimilar to the ending of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews

History buff

I'm a huge fan of history, particularly those periods where the picture of how people lived, communicated and fought, such as the Bronze Age or Dark Ages, remains largely opaque. There's a challenge in deciphering these periods and their peoples from the scant surviving evidence left to us, as well as insight about life to be found in them.

There's also a joy to finding pockets of history that are tied strongly to a specific location, such as the Kingdom of Bohemia in which *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* is set. I love how committed this game is to depicting the medieval landscape, politics and warfare of early 15th century central Europe faithfully, and it results in a superb gaming experience, too.

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

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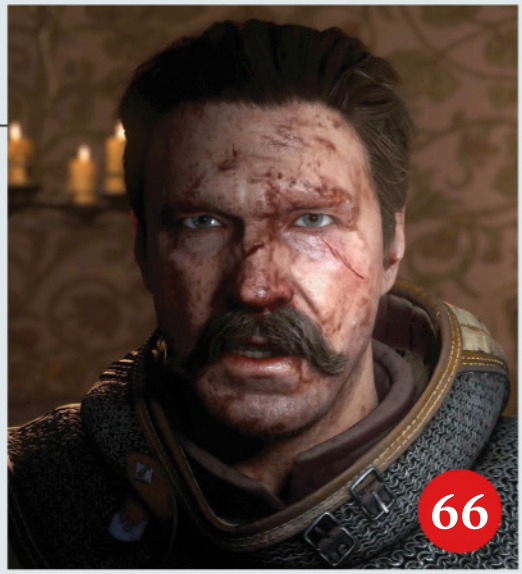

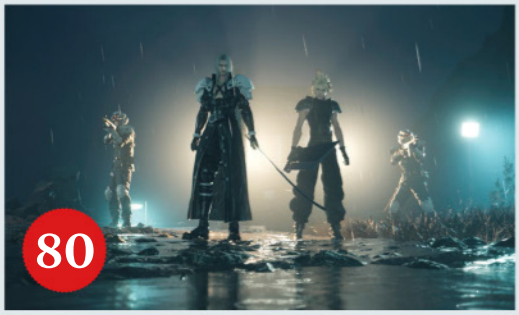

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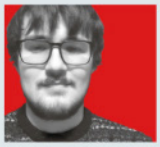
This month's chivalrous reviewers...

ROBERT ZAK
Specialist in
War hippos
Currently playing
Civilization VII
This month
Disappeared for over a month. Bashing the bishop muchly? No, just reviewing *Civ VII*.

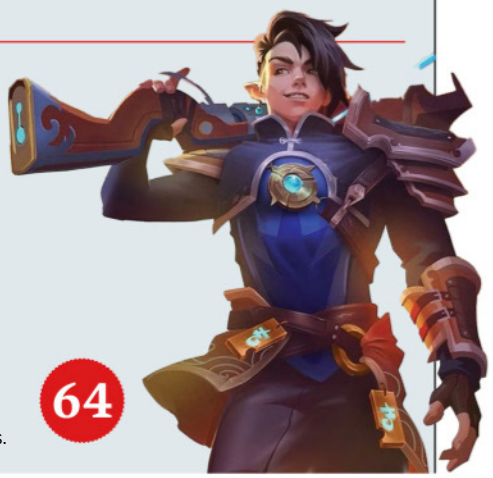
JAKE TUCKER
Specialist in
Crotch shots
Currently playing
Sniper Elite: Resistance
This month
Snuck around PC Gamer Towers with a Nerf gun shooting people in the balls.

JOSH WOLLENS
Specialist in
Noblesse oblige
Currently playing
KC: Deliverance II
This month
Got branded for being a drunken prat. Oh, and in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* he...



SCOTT MCCRAE
Specialist in
Stealth pooping
Currently playing
Ninja Gaiden 2 Black
This month
Infiltrated Edge magazine's office. Left a smelly surprise on the editor's desk.

MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Slackjaw yokels
Currently playing
Resident Evil 4
This month
Fought a series of fug-ugly, chainsaw-wielding bumpkins. Don't visit Yeovil, guys.



CIVI-LITE-ZATION

Lighter and leaner, CIVILIZATION VII sets its sights on assimilating a new audience

By Robert Zak

Founded in the pre-SVGA age of gaming antiquity, *Civilization*'s randomised yet celebratory take on human history has stood the test of time. Over three decades on, you can still put me down in front of any of the games in the series, and I will spend half my waking hours for a week straight guiding my people through the ages via war, diplomacy, exploration, culture-bombing, and plonking down World Wonders before my rivals.

Over its first several entries, the series evolved to better encapsulate the vibrancy of human history in a turn-based strategy format. But in recent outings, it's become more about rejigging rather than revolutionising that cavemen-to-cosmos saga.

Yes, *Civilization V*'s de-stacked units made warfare more tactical, while *Civ VI* spread cities across multiple tiles to allow for more focused, thoughtful city management. But in areas like diplomacy, religion, and warfare, any changes have offered alternative ways to make fun these phenomena of human history rather than pursuing some goal of The Ultimate *Civ* Experience. This is reflected in the fact that both *Civilization V* and *VI* enjoy huge player numbers to this day; *V* is tight and balanced, *VI* is big, bold, and systems-heavy, both are brilliant.

Civilization VII goes for something different again – more a series offshoot than a *Civilization VI* sequel. Its most radical ideas certainly offer an interesting way to play *Civilization*, though as things stand it doesn't feel like the best way to play. It's the most streamlined and pared-back the series has been in years, which certainly helps with accessibility and pacing – particularly in multiplayer – but may leave some yearning for the depth and diversity of its predecessors.

Let's begin with the broad strokes, and the boldest idea that *Civ VII* introduces: Age transitions. Leaders and civilisations have now been separated: you keep the same leader throughout a game, but your civ will change. Each game is split into three Ages – Antiquity, Exploration, Modern – and each time you move into a new one, time skips several hundred years, and you pick from one of a bunch of new civs to lead, specific to that era. So you may start with Egypt in Antiquity, then move onto Normans in the Exploration Age, before landing on the good ol' US of A to see you through the Modern Era. Each civ has some unique units, bonuses and a dedicated civic tree with special policies, which you can carry over into the next era's civ as Traditions.

The most streamlined and pared-back the series has been in years

That Age transition is, by design, far from seamless. As you near the end of an Age, which all civs collectively reach by making progress down four linear Legacy Paths, the world will face some kind of crisis, such as plague or barbarian invasions. Once the crisis reaches its head, the current iteration of your civilisation collapses, and you pick a new one to build over its foundations.

Building on the Golden/Dark Age system introduced in the *Civ VI Rise and Fall* DLC, your achievements of the previous era unlock boons for the next one. These achievements are acquired through four linear Legacy Paths – Economic, Cultural, Military and Science – which reset at the start of each Age, with new goals relevant to that age. The more milestones you reach in each Legacy Path, the more Legacy Points you have to spend on special boons at the start of the next era, until you reach the Modern Age, where each Legacy Path leads to a victory condition. There's a hint of the roguelike about it, as your foot-up in the next era is built on your efforts of the previous one, while also setting you back to something of a new start.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 4X turn-based strategy game in which you guide an empire through the course of human history.

EXPECT TO PAY
£60

DEVELOPER
Firaxis Games

PUBLISHER
2K

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-12700F, 16 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060 Ti

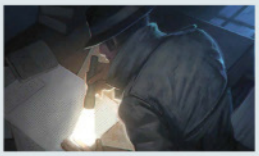
MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
civilization.2k.com/civ-vii

DLC DREAMIN'

Here's what we'd like to see

RELIGION
So many interesting and deep implementations of religion throughout the series' history.



ESPIONAGE
I'll never forget the *Civ IV* campaign where a spy snatched victory from the jaws of defeat.

WORLD CONGRESS
Sanctions, resolutions and screwing over your biggest rival by banning their chocolate.

COLONISATION
Civ IV had a solid vassalage system, then there was *Civ*'s spin-off *Colonization*.

PACING PERSPECTIVE

From a pacing perspective, this works wonders, because at the point in previous games where things would start getting a bit stodgy in terms of unit clutter, city micromanagement, and losing players basically being out of the victory race by the midway point, *Civ VII* speeds things up and narrows the gap between the haves and have-nots. The Legacy Path victory conditions include some quite attainable ones, such as digging up artefacts for the Culture path, or industrialising your nation with railways and factories for the Economic one, and it's not unthinkable that players who were flagging for much of the game to pull a smash-and-grab victory out of the

bag. It certainly keeps things more suspenseful right up to the end.

Each era ushers in new systems. For instance, religion only gets introduced in the Exploration Age, as does the concept of Distant Lands, which unlocks new luxury resources that you can return to your homeland via treasure fleets (the settlement of Distant Lands is also at the heart of the Military Legacy Path for this Age).

By the modern age, the function and yields of luxuries from the Exploration Age changes, as they're no longer exotic luxuries but common commodities that can be slotted into factories for bigger bonuses. In the modern age also, the ideologies of fascism, democracy, and communism come into play, each with their own civic trees and effects on relations with other civs. This is all good stuff, making each era feel somewhat self-contained and defined by unique goals and mechanics. It does mean that such joyful scenarios as phalanx spearmen resolutely poking at tanks, or cavemen smacking helicopters out of the sky with clubs are now gone, but if you want that, then you're spoiled for choice with the preceding six games.

The soft resets and feature-drip of the Age system does a lot to keep the game fresh, but the Modern Age still feels weakest. Turn times don't drag as much as in earlier games thanks to nice touches like the ability to stack military units into Commanders, and to instantly move troops between cities that have railway stations, but it lacks the focus of the ages that precede it. It's a shame that Firaxis cut the World Congress from this outing – which allowed civs to vote on resolutions, global policies and engage in diplomatic skulduggery like banning pearls to undermine the civs that depend on them – because it would've been the perfect thing to spice up the late game.

It's a shame that Firaxis cut the World Congress from this outing

Civ's age-old system of citizen management, whereby you could manually assign a city's population to work specific tiles as a way of adjusting a city's focus, has been replaced by slottable resources. So if you've just built a town, you can send it plenty of grub to accelerate growth, or send some gypsum over to a new Distant Land city that'll give it a nice big production boost. In my short time with the game so far, I've even managed to find some dirty little tricks with resource-slotting, like adding several camels to a city to increase its resource capacity, then building the Tomb of Askia Wonder to grant it extra gold and production for each resource in that city; I'm sure savvier Civvers than myself will find plenty of ways to meta the hell out of this new system.

The idea of distributing resources throughout your empire to where they're most needed is a sensible one, but by the late game I had gotten a bit fatigued with the resource screen, which winds up containing dozens of little resource icons to manually micromanage. Also, you can only chop-and-change resource distribution in cities when you acquire new resources, so you no longer get those nail-biting rushes to complete a Wonder before your rivals, where you'd temporarily send a city into production overdrive, speed-build some logging camps, and deforest the surrounding area to generate as much production as quickly as possible.

URBAN DISTRICTS

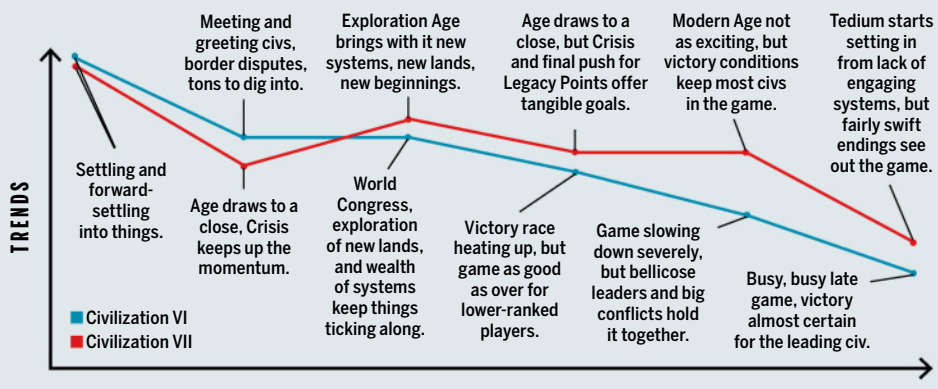
Cities are now divided into urban districts (which can accommodate two buildings each) and rural ones. This means that you have a bit more fluidity about how you want to specialise a city, if at all. In fact, the ability to build over the previous age's buildings almost beckons you to shift a city's production focus across eras. For instance, a city that you founded in Antiquity as a military border stronghold might not have that same purpose a thousand years later once your borders have expanded, so why not turn it into a lucrative economic hub for the Exploration Age?

Workers, or Builders, who were previously used to improve empty tiles around your empire, have been done away with altogether, victims to automation. Instead, each time a city grows you get to instantly upgrade one tile in its vicinity with rural improvements like mines, farms, and plantations. And while I miss certain builder actions like the aforementioned forest clearances for quick-and-dirty production boosts, on balance this is a sensible cut, reducing unit clutter while retaining a key aspect of city improvement.

A little too often, however, *Civ VII*'s fat-trimming cuts into the lean part of the meat as well, losing some richness and flavour in the process. Diplomacy, for instance, feels very thin, and interactions with other leaders a little too transactional. Where before they'd come voicing their opinions on certain actions of yours, share little aphorisms, partake in gossip, or ask you to move your armies away from their borders, they now mainly come to you with offers for generic repeatable agreements.

They're a lot less sassy this time round, and therefore less characterful (and maybe this is just film-studies-graduate-over-analytical wankery bubbling up, but the fact that they're no longer looking out from the screen at you, but side-on at the leader you picked, makes me feel a bit detached from these interactions,

PACING GRAPH *Comparing Civ VII with Civ VI*



FAR LEFT: Every leader interaction now costs Influence Points, so you'll need to be more selective with your harassment.

LEFT: Newly navigable rivers let you take military naval units deep into enemy territory.

BELOW: Plagues and other crises come into play as each Age draws to a close.

ABOVE: Independent Powers can evolve into City-States, though their importance has been cut down from previous games.

BELOW: The newly stackable Army Commanders help move your units around the map quickly, and cut down on unit clutter when stationed.

like I'm the translator at their meeting rather than a leader).

Gone also is the freewheeling bargaining system where you could demand, say, a city, five gold per turn, and a sheep, from enemies in exchange for peace. For a start, resources are now automatically acquired from other civs when you establish trade routes, so you can't lord over other civs by hogging or demanding extortionate prices for valuable resources that they desire. The only bargaining chips in peace treaties are cities, which the AI seems all too eager to give away; there was one point where an alliance I had meant that I was technically at war with someone way on the other side of the world, and despite having not once encountered them in battle, they offered me one of their cities in exchange for peace.

This iteration of *Civilization* is also weirdly, well, civil. City-States and barbarians from previous games have been rolled into Independent Power – some start off hostile and effectively act as barbarians, but all can be befriended by spending enough Influence (a new currency used for every diplomatic interaction). Once you start the befriending process, you're basically guaranteed to become their suzerain for the rest of the age unless they get wiped out.

DIPLOMATIC LEVERAGE

There are no more city-state quests, and no more tussling among civs for the support of these small but important powers via envoys or outright bribery. It relegates what was once an interesting and sneaky way to gain diplomatic leverage to, effectively, the single click of a button. Espionage has received similar treatment, reducing its scope to several fairly low-impact actions, such as Steal Technology, Hinder Military Production and Hinder Research, that you spend Influence to carry out. No more sabotaging Wonder production, spy networks, or feeling like you're running your own MI6-style spy agency.

Religions and governments have also faced severe cuts. Religion somehow manages to feel both unrewarding and frustratingly hands-on to actually play, and simply involves sending missionaries to convert other cities. Converted cities no longer passively spread religion, there are no religious diplomatic effects, nor is there any of that wild religious combat that saw inquisitors striking missionaries down with divine lightning in *Civ VI*. Seeing as religion played a major part in each series game dating back to *Civilization* IV, it's disappointing that over two decades on it's been reduced to something superfluous.

I still lost track of time and reality playing it

As for governments, you are locked into picking one per era, and all it does outside of minor diplomatic sway is affect what your choice of boosts for a bunch of turns is each time your civ enters a period of Celebration. Reducing, say, Theocracy to the occasional binary choice between a temporary Culture boost or production boost for ten turns just doesn't feel like a substantial reflection of that government type's impact on a nation. Like religion, it feels like a backwards step for the series in the name of streamlining.

To be clear, most of *Civ VII*'s shortcomings are relative to the two very fleshed out and still popular games preceding it in the series, which for me still remain at the head of the genre. I still lost track of time and reality playing it, and there are some pretty clear improvements here. Games tick along at a more even pace thanks to some clever ways of addressing unit clutter, and war feels great. Newly navigable rivers have legitimate strategic value too, and I've had some great times sending dreadnoughts upriver deep into enemy civ territory to effectively bombard them from within.

ART STYLE

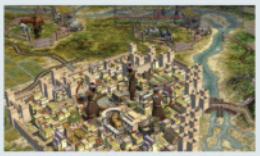
I'm also happy to see the art style build on the more grounded one of *Civ V* rather than the divisive cartoon stylings of *Civ VI* (something about dropping nukes on cities that looked like they were made out of gingerbread never sat right with me). Speaking of presentation though, the UI isn't great; it often requires one too many clicks to get the details you want, there's no shortcut key to scroll through units, nor a way to get an overview of all your units on the map. Where similar games use nested menus and text highlighting to give you quick info about key concepts, in *Civ VII* I'd need to go and type things into the Civilopedia to get basic info on things like building effects or unit combat bonuses.

Civilization VII feels like a reaction to the maximalism of its predecessor: sleeker and speedier, colder and less complex. Being the first game in the series to come out on consoles at the same time as PC, I can't help but feel that some of the complexity cutbacks are made with gamepad players in mind. Some of these cuts are positive, and they help the game flow better (especially, I imagine, in multiplayer), but the simplification of systems like religion, diplomacy, city-states, and espionage means that the journey through history doesn't feel quite as rich or rewarding.

It's as if *Civ*'s gone through its own age transition – a few steps forward, a few steps back. While it's addressed some longstanding issues, there's a little too much that's been stripped away for veterans like myself to call this meaningful progress on the legendary series' Legacy Path. ■

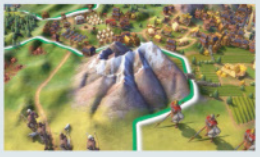
A CIV FOR EVERY OCCASION

Here's what each Civ game offers



CIVILIZATION IV
Beautiful atmosphere and rich systems win the battle against ageing graphics.

CIVILIZATION V
The tightest and cleanest-feeling of the modern *Civ*s. Well balanced and decently paced.



CIVILIZATION VI
The most complete game in the series, with rich diplomacy and smart de-stacked city-building.

CIVILIZATION VII
Without years of updates and expansions behind it, it's too early to judge *Civ VII*'s legacy.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Still a compelling sprint through human history, *Civilization VII* sheds a little too much weight to match its predecessors.

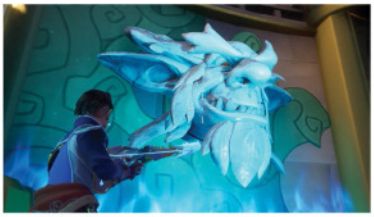
76

As surely as orcs must die, elves must smirk.

RIGHT: An arrow to the face is just a trap rapidly deployed in real time.

FAR RIGHT: The more traps used to kill a given enemy, the quicker your ultimate will charge.

BELOW: Weather and time of day are key in determining what wrenches will be thrown in your plans.



HOLD YOUR ORCSES

ORCS MUST DIE!: DEATHTRAP remains a bloody good time despite some growing pains

By Jonathan Bolding

If it ain't broke, don't fix it. That mantra could apply to horde shooters in general – demonstrating through games like *Helldivers 2* and *Deep Rock Galactic* that mowing down thousands of something will always be cool – as easily as it could apply to *Orcs Must Die!*, a series which spent the last decade content to reprise its novel blend of tower defence and third-person shooting with steely consistency. Trends come and go, industries shift and change, but orcs? Orcs must die, and that's just not the sort of thing you mess with.

Until now, anyway. The series has seen an overhaul in *Deathtrap* as it reaches for that holy grail of infinite roguelike replayability. In past entries, *Orcs Must Die!* had static level layouts, and like any tower defence game, a robust enough setup would become a factory line of firepower so efficient that no amount of orcs could successfully pile through. *Deathtrap*'s sweeping changes feel angled to prevent that solvability by ensuring any and all plans can go wrong; a sea change that sometimes leads to an exhilarating sense of panic, and sometimes leaves the game feeling at odds with itself.

New enemy types hunt players rather than follow the crowd

GOING ROGUE

The meat and potatoes are unchanged, and they're as good as the series has ever been; *Deathtrap*'s biggest shakeups are with format and progression, substituting a linear campaign with highly replayable missions dressed up with mutations.

These mutations can sting, preventing trap placement in key areas or giving enemies random buffs. But after each successful wave, you'll pile on upgrades to your traps and weapons. After a mission, you can either stash your rewards and start from zilch, or 'gamble forward', selecting a new map but retaining all upgrades and mutations. With plenty of meta-progression upgrades to snag and difficulty that scales with each additional player, it's easy to see how things remain fresh.

New avenues for variance are all over *Deathtrap*, from undead which spawn at night to water elementals that arrive in the rain. There's plenty to consider when picking a mission, and you might even be tempted to reorient your trap selection to anticipate certain modifiers. These changes are *Deathtrap*'s strongest aspect, and because your base's health carries over between rounds, that choice to gamble forward can be a tense one on rough runs.

None of this stops you from making an absolutely ruthless killbox though, and that's where developer Robot has made some key tweaks to send best laid plans astray. Plenty of new flying enemies will bypass ground traps entirely, new enemy types hunt players directly rather than follow the crowd, unstable portals will open and spawn enemies where you may have no traps at all.

While these changes do mix up my trapping strategies, they sometimes de-emphasise the importance of those plans. The killboxes of yore still work, but expensive trap combos are sure to be ignored by some enemies, swinging the emphasis away from tower defence and toward the good-not-great gunplay. Whenever I'm pulled away from my devious labyrinths to go and shoot some stragglers halfway across the map, it feels like a distraction rather than an equally fun element of play.

I do hope to rope in a few friends in for some wave defence. That niche mix of action and lite strategy is a vibe this series has locked down. But its metamorphoses into a rich and infinitely replayable game is not complete with *Deathtrap*, and its systems come into conflict just a bit too often to match the elegant simplicity of *Orcs Must Die! 3*. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A co-op roguelite tower defence/third-person shooter hybrid

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

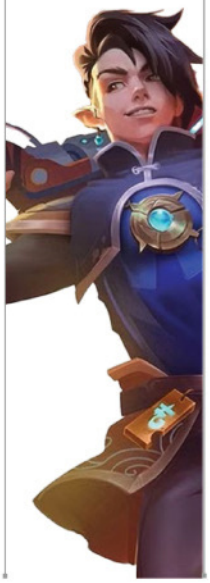
DEVELOPER
Robot Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Robot Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-12700F, 16 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

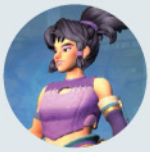
LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2273980/Orcs_Must_Die_Deathtrap



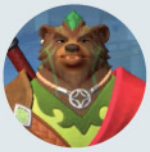
MEET THE MAGES

What's wizardly warfare without them?

HARLOW
This war mage has a pet dragon, Henry, that she can turn into a raging behemoth by feeding him treats, but it sounds like Henry really hates the treats.



WREN
Wren's time crystals will re-arm traps faster than is normally possible, making her great against anyone you need to kill twice.



KALOS
The support character, Kalos can heal and smash his enemies with a hammer. He's one of the only characters without a ranged weapon.

MAC
The resident sniper can send orcs flying with his gravity lift and take them out from across the map. Every headshot adds to a stacking damage multiplier.

PC GAMER VERDICT

***Orcs Must Die!: Deathtrap* retains the frenzied fun of its predecessors despite a mixed bag of changes.**

72

BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE 2 is huge, ambitious and brilliant

By Joshua Wolens

K*ingdom Come: Deliverance 2* might be the most specific RPG I've ever played. Everything from its location, to its era, to its combat, to its clothing feels hyper-tuned, dialled in with precision to suit oddball tastes. Looking for a sweeping fantasy romp? You won't find one.

Like its predecessor, this is a game whose story springs inevitably from the politics of its time and place: the Kingdom of Bohemia in 1403. Want to mow down your foes by the dozen? Good luck. Combat is a strange dance of positioning both your hands and feet relative to those of your enemies, and charging into the fray even in the late game is liable to get you cut apart. Want to equip a hauberk without first equipping a padded gambeson beneath it? What are you? Some kind of moron?

Like I say, oddball tastes, but they happen to match mine exactly, and my only regret after 75 hours or so with *KCD2* is that the demands of having to review the thing compelled me to sprint to its endpoint. I would happily have spent another 75 hours getting chivalrous in the Bohemian crownlands. This is a new RPG classic, an instant favourite for me, and a successor in tone and feel to the great mavericks of old.

LADS ON CHORE

KCD2 follows on directly from the first game. You're still Henry of Skalitz: blacksmith's son, noble bastard, orphaned when mercenaries attacked your town, and companion to Lord Hans Capon of Pirkstein.

This is a new RPG classic, an instant favourite for me

Bohemia is in the grip of war, torn between supporters of the abducted King Wenceslas of Bohemia and supporters of his abductor and brother, Sigismund. Capon's lordly guardians are Wenceslas supporters, and have dispatched him, Henry, and a retinue of protectors to deliver a letter to Otto von Bergow, one of the foremost supporters of Sigismund, with an eye to putting an end to the whole internecine thing. It all goes well and everyone gets to go home.

Oh no, wait, sorry, it all goes to hell pretty much immediately, and before long Henry and Hans are AWOL on a quest that sees them jumping through all the mad loopholes and imbrications of 15th-century central European politics, hopping from faction to faction in a plot that gets intriguing, particularly if you're the kind of dork who will get very excited by the presence of historical figures like Jan Zizka and Emperor Sigismund.

Their mission doesn't just take them through the haute monde of medieval Bohemia; it brings them into contact with the periphery of society, too. Jewish people, Roma, even a Muslim scholar pop up to offer a glimpse into life outside the confines of the imperial court, and while their tales aren't always masterful, they feel well-meaning.

All in all, it's a period with great fodder for anyone who likes sinking their teeth into meaty political plots, and presents plenty of opportunities to chuck difficult choices and moral compromises at you, which the game does semi-regularly. But where the Euro-RPGs of yore delighted in visiting you with the consequences of your choices, it does sometimes feel like *KCD2* pulls its punches on that front. A choice that might, for instance, seem to be about choosing which of your companions dies might resolve with a hand wave: actually, all the named characters are fine, but boy we had you there for a second, eh? It's a lack of sadism that shears some choices of weight.

But the politics are knotty and good fun, and the gold thread that ties the whole narrative together is the relationship between Henry and Capon. Henry's a plucky, likeable lad with a British West Country accent you simply don't give to a videogame protagonist unless you are possessed of an almost religious vision, while plummy Lord Capon is realised incredibly well. It helps that, in contradistinction to most of the game's secondary cast – whose voice acting ranges from 'acceptable' to 'inexplicable' – they're both portrayed with plenty of range.

But also, Capon is so believably of his time and place, with all the

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A systems-heavy RPG set around the actual historical conflict between King Wenceslas of Bohemia and his abductor and brother, Sigismund

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Warhorse Studios

PUBLISHER
Deep Silver

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 3700x, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4080

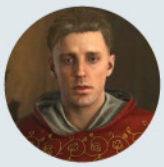
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
kingdomcomerpg.com

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE

FRIENDS LIKE THESE

Henry's allies can leave something to be desired



LORD CAPON
The guy Henry's charged with protecting. Snobbish, workshy, and naïve.

FATHER GODWIN
A disgraced priest who was a little too good at killing, boozing and fornicating.

MARGRAVE JOBST
A noble supporter of Wenceslas. Winner of 'Bohemia's Oiliest Man' award.

RADZIG KOBYLA
Henry's biological dad. Practically a ghost who fades in to offer advice before vanishing again.

Bohemia is full of colourful characters. Often literally.

FAR LEFT: Henry and Capon are very fancy postmen at the game's start.

LEFT: Combat isn't hack-and-slash; you need to pick your angle and timing.

ABOVE: Henry's lordly biological dad crops up to offer advice.

BELOW: You can spec your Henry for combat, stealth, and social, but you'll be good at all of them eventually.

obnoxiousness of a child raised from birth to think he's inherently better than the common rabble, but under the muck of aristocracy a genuinely decent lad. His development and the evolution of his relationship with Henry are very well done indeed.

It's the game's systemic ambitions that really elevate it, though. There are times when Warhorse's simulation of a medieval world approaches *STALKER*-levels of zeal. Stole something from someone's house without being spotted? All good, but if someone spied you hanging around there they'll figure it out and report you to the guards.

It's the game's systemic ambitions that really elevate it

It's that kind of world: a place of rules, that feels interested in itself for its own sake, and that feels to some extent like it happens independent of you, the player.

By the end of the game, when you're teeming with perks and fancy gear, you'll be a Bohemian Cuisinart tearing all your foes to shreds, but even this feels like a more earned and systems-driven process than it does in your average *Skyrim*-inspired RPG. You're not just inevitably climbing a levelling power curve, you're feeling out the edges of the game – what's possible, what's impossible, what's expected from you.

By the time you become a whirlwind of death it's down to all your skill points, sure, but it's also a product of you making sense of the game's angle-based combat system, its combos, knowing how to approach foes, and what the deficiencies of the AI are that let you chalk up a few stealth or ranged kills before the fight kicks off properly.

But even better, it's a world that's happy to let you cheat your way to the top. It obeys its own rules to your detriment and your advantage. Seen an impossibly expensive set of armour in a shop? *KCD2* will let you break in after dark and pull it right out of the storekeep's stockroom. Want to take advantage of every skill-trainer on the map to buff up your skills way ahead of the endgame? The money you pay for their training goes right into their eminently pickpocketable inventory. It's a game that usually answers the question 'Wait, couldn't I just...?' with a resounding 'Yes, absolutely'.

And then, if you're like me, you spend about five hours robbing a single castle of all its valuable loot, armour, weapons, and clothing. It has no problem letting you feel like you've gotten one over on it.

Not that you have to become a criminal, of course. You're just as likely to stumble across a skirmish in the road as you are to see an enticingly robbable armourer. No one will object to you yanking off a dead man's boots, giving you easy access to what would, in another videogame, be much higher-level gear.

It's all a continuation of the philosophy of the first game, of course, but where I remember hearing horror stories of bugs and technical weirdness on KCD1's launch, the second game has been pretty bug-free in my playing. My performance has been good, I've not run into crashes, and all its ambitious systems seem truly to work, discounting a few oddities and, well, a frankly huge number of typos in the game's subtitles and menus, which I hope get patched promptly.

GLORIA MUNDI

Bohemia, it turns out, is large. *KCD2* features two alarmingly sizeable maps stuffed to high heaven with things to do. So long as you approach them without a fanatically completionist fervour, they are just a big grab-bag of things to do: activities and distractions that root you in the world and act as yet more means to give yourself an advantage.

There's hunting, bandit camps, graves to dig up, side quests to trigger, all the things you expect, along with blacksmithing, alchemy, dice, treasure maps and who-knows-what else. So far as I can tell, medieval Czechia is one big freshers' fair full of exciting new hobbies to take up, and getting good at any of them hands you new skill and perk points to use in your pursuit of slaughtering your enemies.

They're also, naturally, intensely involved. You'll heat your metal, hammer it into shape, quench it when it's done and you'll like it. Alchemy is even more absurdly elaborate, which is something I admire conceptually but which doesn't quite work in practice. I never really figured it out, and every potion-brewing sesh ended with Henry muttering about how I'd screwed it up, though you still get a slightly worse potion for your trouble.

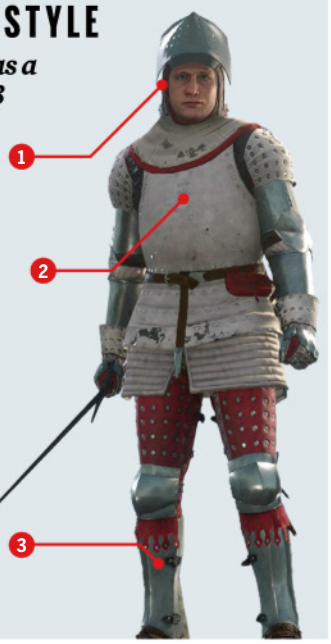
But the point is that, even over its ample runtime, *KCD2* manages to maintain a sense of momentum and unfurling between all its stuff to do and the zigs and zags of its plot. You're a soldier, now a spy, now a gambler, now a blacksmith. The arc of its medieval life simulator is long and varied. About 50 hours in, the game suddenly sprang a whole Thieves' Guild questline on me to finally make use of those stealth skills I'd been underusing for the rest of my playthrough.

SIGNED AND SEALED

KCD2 feels a bit miraculous: an ambitious and peculiar thing that somehow fulfils its ambition and peculiarity, managing to hit the highs Warhorse aimed for in the first game but perhaps fell just short of. It feels tailor-made for a certain brand of systems-loving sicko and manages to actually make good on their (or at least my) nostalgic yearning for those halcyon games of old. ■

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

Getting dressed was a whole to-do in 1403



1 NO CAP
Want to wear a helmet? You better have some sort of coif or padded headpiece to go under it, youngster. What, you want to take those impacts right to your noggin?

2 CHEST OUT
You're not getting anything onto your torso unless you've got a gambeson to go under it. You know what they say: gambeson or go home.

3 LEG DAY
Set aside a day to put your trousers on. You'll need breeches, then tie each bit of leg armour to every exposed bit of skin.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Kingdom Come: Deliverance 2 **is a big, bold, unutterably weird thing, and a new RPG classic.**

90

BACK IN BLACK

NINJA GAIDEN 2 BLACK gives a makeover to an action game classic

By Scott McCrae

There aren't enough games like *Ninja Gaiden* in the world. I relish struggling through punishing combat in games that give me the tools to battle in a way that's typically reserved for flashy cutscenes. Intense enemy encounters and rhythmic timing mixed with *Tony Hawk*-style experimentation just hits that sweet spot – and I don't think any game mixes both of these in their most extreme forms more than *Ninja Gaiden 2*.

Back in 2004, *Ninja Gaiden* demanded a more defensive approach to combat than contemporaries like *Devil May Cry*. Pulling off carefully timed strikes and flashy wall-runs between precision blocking was excruciatingly punishing but an exhilarating exercise in disciplining my fingers. Then *Ninja Gaiden 2* threw that out the window and stuck a brick on the gas. Excess is the name of the game. Enemies shoot out fountains of blood, relentless offence is key to survival, and everything is faster. If *Ninja Gaiden 1* is a long-form symphony, then *Ninja Gaiden 2* is a two-minute punk banger.

Front and centre in *Ninja Gaiden 2 Black*, after being toned down in *Sigma 2*, are dismemberment and obliteration techniques; as you attack enemies, their arms, legs and heads come flying off, spurting red. But haemorrhaging enemies are somehow scarier than healthy ones. A one-armed ninja can still lunge at me and detonate himself with a grenade the second I stop moving. To combat this you're armed with obliteration techniques, which live up to their name as Ryu heads into a flashy animation of him turning his enemy into piles of viscera.

As you attack enemies, their arms, legs and heads come flying off

Ryu himself feels incredible to control thanks to his nimble but deadly moveset. You'll be able to get by with just attacking and dodging, but the game really reaches that next level when you include his ninja abilities like wallrunning and air dashing into the mix. These moves give the combat an incredible sense of momentum. With enough confidence, you often don't even have to slow down to assess the situation. Ryu's moves, many available right from the first stage, allow me to pull off stuff like running across a wall parallel to an enemy and slashing them in two in mid air, which had me hollering because it was so rad.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A UE5 remaster of *Ninja Gaiden 2* that includes elements of previous versions

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Team Ninja

PUBLISHER
Koei Tecmo

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 5800X, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No

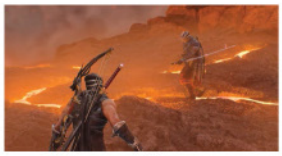
LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/3287520/NINJA_GAIDEN_2_Black

WEAPONS GALORE

Ryu has access to nine weapons, and somehow all of them are great. Swapping from Ryu's blade to a pair of bruising tonfas or a giant scythe requires a pause, interrupting the flow of a fight and discouraging on-the-fly experimentation. Each weapon can be upgraded to unlock new techniques, and I'm happy that *Black* brings back the option to freely boost them in shops versus *Sigma*'s constrained timed unlocks.

The Xbox 360 version of *Ninja Gaiden 2* was notable for having a huge number of enemies on screen at once, and while that hasn't returned for *Black*, the enemy count and difficulty has been bumped up from

TOP: Ryu's Unreal Engine 5 glow-up is impressively detailed.



TOP: Demons, werewolves, and robots all die the same if you're Ryu.

FAR RIGHT: *Dead or Alive*'s Ayane makes a playable appearance.

Sigma. I played on Acolyte (Normal) difficulty and found the game quite breezy. Sadly, I realised there was no option to swap to a higher difficulty mid-story. I have gone back and played some higher modes and can say my ass is getting kicked, so I'm looking forward to a replay.

Aside from the usual Unreal Engine 5 issues like texture loading and occasional stuttering (although thankfully I didn't experience much), *Ninja Gaiden 2 Black*'s fully revamped graphics are a winner. The game looks absolutely gorgeous; the lighting, ray tracing and character models shine with a premium gloss. This is also complemented by smooth performance; for the most part, the game ran perfectly at 60fps for me at 1440p.

Even if it's not the remaster I thought it would be from the title, *Ninja Gaiden 2 Black* was a joyful way to experience the game again. Having a version of the game that takes everything good about *Sigma 2* and turns it into a far better experience. And at the end of the day, if you aren't entrenched in the details of each version all you'll experience is an excellent action game. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Ninja Gaiden 2 Black is a marvellous way to experience an all-time great action game today.

85

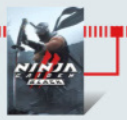
BACK 2 BACK

Each version of Ninja Gaiden 2

NINJA GAIDEN 2
2008
The original version of *Ninja Gaiden 2* released as an Xbox 360 exclusive and introduced us to the copious gore the game is known for.

NINJA GAIDEN SIGMA 2
2009
Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2 brought the game to PS3, drastically lowering the gore and enemy counts while adding new content.

NINJA GAIDEN SIGMA 2 PLUS
2013
Sigma 2 Plus was released on the PS Vita and introduced the Tag Mission mode. This version was used for the *Master Collection*.



NINJA GAIDEN 2 BLACK
2025
Ninja Gaiden 2 Black aims to create the definitive edition of the classic slasher bringing in elements of the original and Sigma.

MAGICAL

Big hearts and bigger monsters make ETERNAL STRANDS something special

By Kerry Brunskill

I don't even have to waste my time trekking across boring expanses of open field to reach the things that have caught my eye, as this compact game is broken up into a series of carefully crafted areas attached to a homely hub. It reminds me of *Monster Hunter* more than a seamless but flabby open world sprawl of #content.

The missions I undertake in these areas often overlap in some way, so even though one character's request to collect glowing plants at night didn't exactly have me rushing out of camp, I ended up easily gathering everything I needed anyway when I later found myself in the same area as part of an expedition.

The weather, shown on a summary screen for the area before heading out, matters as much as the time of day. The climate is fixed for the duration of the expedition, and deliberately extreme and unnatural – another mystery to unravel in this strange land. These conditions add new hazards to familiar places; a drought making fire dangerously easy to spread, miasma forcing me to choose between going around or taking a painful dash through.

Whatever the weather, I have to use my small but versatile pool of fire and ice abilities well if I want to survive. Some of their uses are obvious – setting fire to fur will cause extra damage over time – but right from the start there's always something more creative I can do instead. Huge chasms can be traversed with icy bridges, and wooden floors can be set alight. It feels natural and improvised, something that happened only because I made it so.

I love the way a bench can become an offensive weapon to hurl

Complementing these are some fun telekinetic powers, allowing me to tear my surroundings to pieces. I love the way a bench can become an offensive weapon to hurl at my enemies. The only thing better than smashing a monster with furniture is to toss it into a chasm myself, although that does mean missing out on the materials they drop when defeated.

I do need those if I'm going to craft myself some new gear from the designs I pick up while exploring. Instead of this being a chore where I go farm a list of specific items, all materials are split into broader types, with individual materials impacting on the strengths and weaknesses of these creations; thick fur insulating against the cold, rare ores leaving me with sturdier armour.

CRAFTY CREATIONS

This customisation is balanced just right, with min-maxing present but very much optional. There was never a moment where I got smashed to bits by a gigantic monster and thought I had to give up and go gather five rocks and some thread instead of fighting with more skill.

I was having too much fun in these epic encounters to take a farming break anyway. Much like running into a drake in *Dragon's Dogma 2*, these standout foes take serious effort to bring down. Sometimes I need to nimbly roll in for a quick swipe of my sword, or hit aerial opponents with arrows. There are moments where only swinging a huge lump of metal around will do, parts shattering and monsters visibly wincing under the force of blows.

Open-ended adventure games often leave me resenting their endless hamster wheels, smothering me with busywork for busywork's sake. But the tight focus here, always offering specific tasks in well-defined locations that naturally led from one plot point to the next, meant I honestly didn't want the game to end. 20-ish hours and the chance to go back and mop up any unfinished quests just wasn't enough. *Eternal Strands* dared to give me less, and because of that I only ended up loving it more. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An athletic ARPG set in a gorgeous playground of a world

EXPECT TO PAY
£33.50

DEVELOPER
Yellow Brick Games

PUBLISHER
Yellow Brick Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900HX, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

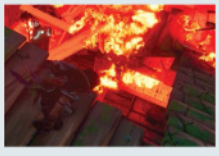
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
yellowbrickgames.ca

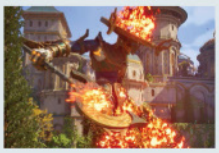
FLAME ON

Set fire to everything

GRASS
That's what it's there for, right?

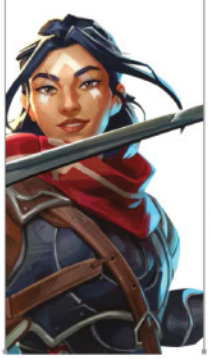


WOOD
If they didn't want it to burn, they should've made it out of stone.



GIANT MONSTERS
This one comes pre-flamed. Which is handy.

ME
It's fine, I have healing potions. I think.



PC GAMER VERDICT

An unforgettable combination of intense action, inventive improvisation and an engaging story.

86

FAR LEFT: Everything can be climbed, from giant trees to massive monsters.

BELOW: Freezing enemies can help Brynn make a quick getaway.

SNIPE HUNT

SNIPER ELITE: RESISTANCE continues to deliver pulpy thrills

By Jake Tucker

Nazis are pretty much the definitive bad guys. They're perfect videogame fodder because you never have to feel bad about punching, shooting or exploding them. And for sad real-world reasons, it's never felt more cathartic to do so. *Sniper Elite: Resistance* couldn't have come along at a better time. Channelling the spirit of a classic World War II movie, there's daring romps and blockbuster beats aplenty.

Sniper Elite: Resistance is the first spin-off for the *Sniper Elite* series that doesn't have you fighting zombies, and it's clearly hoping to capture some of the magic of 2022's *Sniper Elite 5*. You play as new recruit to the series Harry Hawker, fighting arm in arm with several of the French Resistance characters from *Sniper Elite 5* and romping around the countryside. It feels a lot like playing an expansion pack for *Sniper Elite 5*, with familiar enemy behaviours, mechanics and tools. But that's no bad thing – *Sniper Elite 5* was a huge step up in quality, and *Resistance* feels like half a step forward again, full of excellent playgrounds for the series' trademark mix of long-range sniping and guerrilla warfare.

There are just seven main missions, but they're all huge and took me about 90 minutes to play through. The French locales are varied, inviting you to crouchwalk your way through farms, chateaux, secret bases and more. Importantly, each of the levels feels distinct, with a good mix of tight corridors, interesting geometry to stealth your way through and, of course, some perfect viewpoints for sniping.

THE EXPLORATION AGE

Sniper Elite 5 paid homage to *Hitman* somewhat, and here that admiration is even more obvious from the wide open levels and greater focus on player freedom and exploration. The first run through a level is often just poking and prodding at the different systems to see what's possible, what routes you can skulk your way through the easiest, and which vantage points you prefer.

It does mean that achieving your goals on that first run can be tricky. In one level, I encountered a multi-storey hotel – the map told me that the objective was inside, but not where it was. I had to explore five floors before I found what I was looking for, a 30-minute search that left the place a graveyard.

There are just seven main missions, but they're all huge

Many of these objectives are bombastic affairs – sabotaging dams, blowing up trains, that sort of thing – but there are also a few kill objectives that play out like a riff on the *Hitman* series directly. You can always simply shoot your target in the head, but if you kill them with the specific method requested you'll unlock a brand-new weapon.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A third-person snipe-'em-up with tense combat and fun stealth

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Rebellion

PUBLISHER
Rebellion

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 5800X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
Yes, co-op and PvP

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2169200/Sniper_Elite_Resistance

PISTOLS AT DAWN

Win with this incredible pistol build

1 **Sight:** ZF4 P
2 **Barrel:** Overpressure Power
3 **Muzzle:** Modded M-27 Supressor
4 **Stock:** Control-96 Shoulder
5 **Rear Grip:** Quick-draw grip
6 **Receiver:** Heavy Bolt

I enjoyed the extra challenge. Killing with a bullet is easy in *Sniper Elite: Resistance*, but doing the deed with poisoned wine or an explosive piece of coal? That's much tougher, and often involves passing up on several different tempting opportunities as you sneak around behind them setting things in motion.

OLD SCHOOL STEALTH

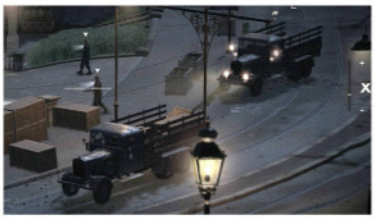
Violence is easy, but stealth is much more challenging, demanding patience and information gathering. A lot of recent stealth games just chuck ultramodern gadgets or magical devices into the mix to make things easier, and I've got to admit I've been spoiled by them. Here, the best gadget at your disposal is often a silenced pistol, or even just a patch of mud to go prone in.

You do still have a few tricks up your sleeve, though. I've gotten the most use out of the variety of explosives you can use to booby trap bodies and walkways, but there are also lures to distract people, and even a little helmet on a stick that will distract (and mark) enemy snipers.

But it's still pretty unforgiving. Once enemies are in combat mode, they pretty much stay that way until you kill them. As a result, once you're seen things often devolve into awkward skirmishes or a tornado of violence depending on the level. It's tough to disengage because of the crushing weight of enemies around you. And in addition to a numbers advantage, the troops you're fighting are pretty formidable – once they've got you in their sights, they'll fire at your last known position to keep you pinned down while others move up to flank you. Overconfidence or a bad position will quickly dump you out to a game over screen.

So, gathering information before everything goes sideways is your best hope of survival. Stalking enemies and tagging them with your binoculars allows you to track their movements for the rest of your

This obscene pistol could be your best friend.

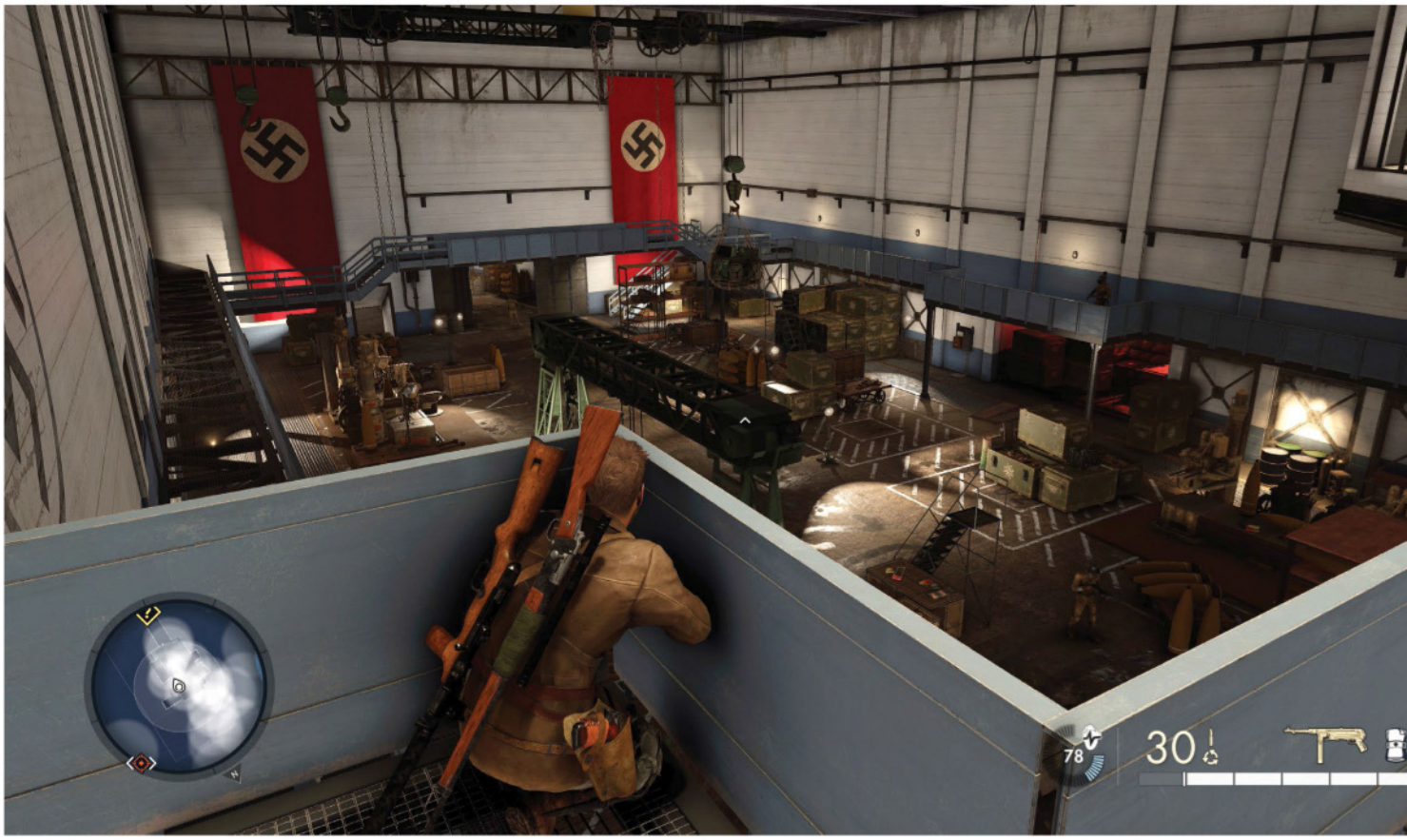


ABOVE: Making friends as the Axis sniper.

BELOW: Get pinned down and it's over.

ABOVE: Mindblowing ballistics, man.

FAR RIGHT: It's a stealth game, so you'll spend a lot of time sneaking up behind people.



mission, but also to find out more about them. Their equipment, sure, but it also turns out your binoculars are capable of detecting someone's darkest secrets. One of those soldiers might have plans to flee Germany to be with their partner, while another... has a pet rock.

GOING BALLISTIC

When the stealth goes out the window you get to play with *Resistance*'s remarkably detailed ballistics. Bullets will punch through wood to hit anything behind it, and pretty much everything you can shoot is fully modelled too – externally and internally.

Sniper Elite's killcam is one of the defining features of the franchise. With almost every killing bullet fired, you get to see the damage done to the target via an X-ray view that shows bones breaking, muscles tearing and organs bursting. Rifle shots put on a spectacular and harrowing show, but this time you also get killcams for kills with your pistol or secondary weapon, and those are much less visually striking.

As I get older, I find watching the impact of your bullets on a human body doesn't really spark joy. I don't know if I want to see that my long-range shot took out several vertebrae, or blew someone's jaw across the nearby countryside. Call me a prude, but these killcams slow gameplay down significantly, and mostly just make me squirm.

You can incapacitate enemies with limb shots and their pals will strive to save them, slowing themselves down as they hoist their injured colleague onto their back and try to get them to safety. You could use this for bait if you wanted. I often wanted.

My favourite trick is that if you shoot a soldier in the arm, they'll drop their main gun and switch to a sidearm. In practice this doesn't happen that often, but the first time I noticed it I let out a squeak of joy.

Resistance's weapons start off clumsy and your character can't take many hits. Given that an alarm will often bring every enemy on the map into one big fight, the best way to progress is to wage a guerrilla battle, evening the odds with each brutal firefight. I'd try to take out as many people as possible, hiding or trapping bodies ahead of the grand firefight that often accompanied me trying to do any big objective.

There's a fairly dull skill system that will make you more survivable over time, but the real empowerment comes from both learning as a player and tinkering with your weapons. I quickly fell in love with the Modelle 1935 pistol, bolting a stock, silencer and long-range scope onto it, turning it into a pocket sized rifle.

If you shoot a soldier in the arm, they'll drop their main gun

FULL INVASION

Once you're done with the campaign, extra modes offer more to do. Survival is just a horde mode where you try to protect your HQ from waves of enemies, Propaganda features small scenarios set in the maps you've already played but let you play as different characters and complete new challenges, and then there's a player vs player multiplayer mode for sniping matches.

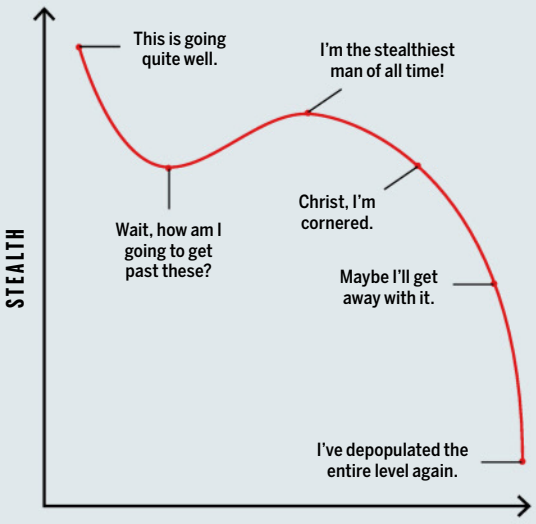
These are all fine, and a good way to eke more fun out of your time with *Resistance*, but the standout is Invasion, which first came into the series with *Sniper Elite 5*. This lets you drop into another player's campaign as an Axis sniper to stalk and hunt them. *Resistance*, like many stealth games, is about learning patterns and systems and exploiting them, but when you are there as the sniper hunting them, you both have to do some more creative thinking. I've baited the hero of their own campaign into hunting me only to have them stumble into a mine next to an explosive barrel that killed them instantly. I've had a tense Enemy At The Gates-style standoff that went against my opponent because after they shot and incapacitated me, they were charged by my German allies and killed as I lay on the ground trying to patch myself up. It's great fun playing a miniboss for someone else, and I can see myself revisiting this for as long as there are still games to invade.

All in all there's plenty to keep you occupied here, and despite some frustrations, there's only one major problem: new hero Harry Hawker. He's maybe my least favourite protagonist of any game from the last few years. I've always thought of Karl Fairburne, star of the main series, as a human-shaped blob of porridge, unburdened by anything remotely resembling charisma. Compared to Hawker however, Fairburne is George Clooney. He feels like an awkward children's TV presenter, constantly chipping in to tell me that long grass is itchy but good to hide in, or suggesting I might get spotted if I go this way. I think I might hate Harry Hawker, with all his overexplaining and the way he says things repeatedly with the exact same intonation during the same level. Hawker doesn't seem to care, though, rattling through his canned lines like he's getting paid per word.

Sniper Elite: Resistance is a solid stealth game that wears its influences on its sleeve but has plenty of its own tricks. It's old fashioned, but I find it compelling that it's a game that knows exactly what it wants to be. *Sniper Elite* has felt like the heir to the stealth genre for a while now, and *Resistance* further solidifies that, a generous helping of sneaky action that's only slightly less impressive because it's retreading the same path *Sniper Elite 5* took in 2022. ■

SOFTLY, SOFTLY

Stealth, moment by moment



PC GAMER VERDICT

Rebellion's *Sniper Elite: Resistance* is a fun but inessential addition to the franchise.

74

MY BROKEN BODY

CITIZEN SLEEPER 2 isn't the perfect sequel – but perfection's overrated

By Harvey Randall

I don't think about my body much, if I can help it. The idea that my mind is just a rider in something that can wear, tear and break down isn't a comforting thought. *Citizen Sleeper 2: Starward Vector* reminds me of this fact twofold: It's a game about the slow degradation of the body, sure, but it's also a sequel: an attempt to show growth, to do more. But in trying to grow, it's become fractured, bumpy, and nicked in places – even if it's still lovely in its own way.

While Gareth Damian Martin's first game hinged around building and finding community in a strange place, *Citizen Sleeper 2* turns the gaze inward to the self. The body and how it might change – naturally or because of others – is the threat.

You're a Sleeper: an android copy of a living, breathing person invented to circumvent anti-AI regulations. You escaped your corporate masters and stumbled right into the yoke of a criminal one, a right bastard named Laine, and the game begins as you scramble away from his clutches – with a botched reboot wiping most of your memory.

Cue a series of Firefly-esque contracts, packaged into an adventure-of-the-week style format. You balance a bunch of other secondary resources – cyro (space dollars), fuel, supplies – while trying not to let your body crumple apart.

This setup plays out well on the whole, because *Citizen Sleeper 2*'s story is filled with charming characters, knife-twists to the heart, and fascinating worldbuilding. Each contract is a fun exercise in risk assessment, one that rewards you with charming narrative as well as resources. It's a great adventure, with enough texture to get me thinking about a campaign of my own.

It's also a thoughtful treatise on what it means to be a broken thing. The Sleeper is a machine, so the metaphor is writ large, but the game also makes it clear that your fleshy friends are going through the exact same thing on a drawn-out timescale. It outright states this to you: "No one gets to choose their own body. Everyone has to contend with the entropy of their flesh."

It's fitting, then, that the game itself suffers from its own kind of entropic pull. *Citizen Sleeper 2* is more ambitious than the first game, widening the scope and increasing the number of plates you need to spin. But it's this desire to go bigger that ultimately makes it a little flawed, much like your body's own degenerating machinery.

You're a Sleeper: an android copy of a living person

DICE NOT SO NICE

Citizen Sleeper 2's mechanics don't gel with its themes, sometimes. In the first game, your initial scrambling for resources – and the slow, gradual comforts you achieved afterwards – paired nicely with the desperate circumstance you found yourself in.

Citizen Sleeper 2, meanwhile, never quite properly gets its dice rolling in harmony with its storytelling. The game starts you off with a sense of feeling hunted, and it's possible to slide into a death spiral early on – but as long as you build up just the slightest bit of momentum, this pressure rarely ever risks catching up to you.

This worked in the first game because your hard-earned comfort and safety was sort of the point – it doesn't work nearly as well when I'm meant to be fearing Laine and feeling hunted. There are other areas where its mechanics grate against the excellent storytelling, too. Like the well-written crew you're meant to love and bond with, who are just dice meatshields on your contracts.

Despite my gripes and complaints, though, I can't help but look at *Citizen Sleeper 2* with a burning fondness – there are parts of it I don't like, but they didn't spoil my time with its story. I felt like I was being invited – earnestly, often, and with a lot of intimacy – into a world that had been pent up in a busy mind, and was coming out all at once. It's a universe that's desperate to share itself, and the more it lets that yearning show, the more things start to flake and peel. As such, *Citizen Sleeper 2* is not the perfect sequel.

Sure, it's a game that overextends itself, rattling against the mechanical bars of game balance, budget, and scope. It yaws steeply into unfamiliar territory and groans under its own weight. But it trades mechanical grace for a more developed, complex, and fragile glimpse into its world – and its Sleeper's body. I've come away energised, moved, and inspired by its busted-up heart. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A heartfelt sci-fi RPG where you manage resources, go on missions, and get to know your android body

EXPECT TO PAY
£21

DEVELOPER
Jump Over the Age

PUBLISHER
Fellow Traveller

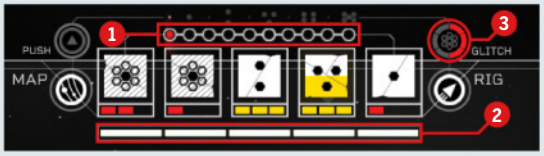
REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 5800, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
fellowtraveller.games/citizen-sleeper-2-starward-vector

ANATOMY OF A SLEEPER

Dice, stress, and you



1 ENERGY Easily replenished, but deadly when it's gone – if you lose energy and have none, you start taking stress.

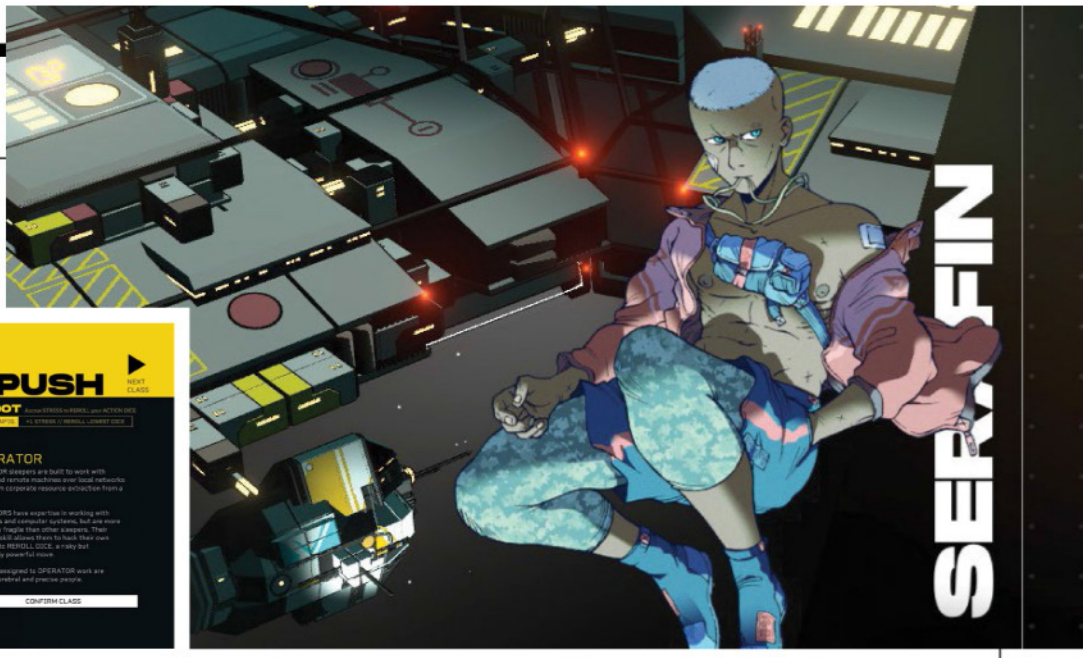
2 STRESS The more stress you take, the higher your chances of damaging your dice.

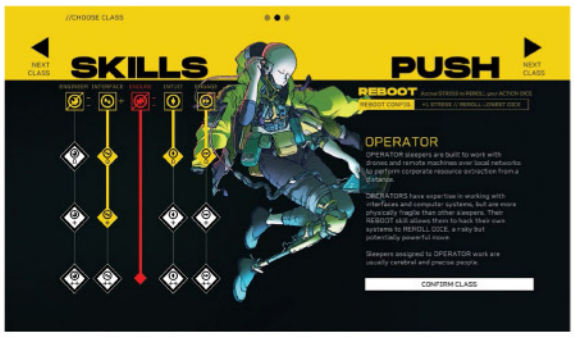
3 GLITCH You take a permanent Glitch – an ever-present reminder of your failing mechanical body.

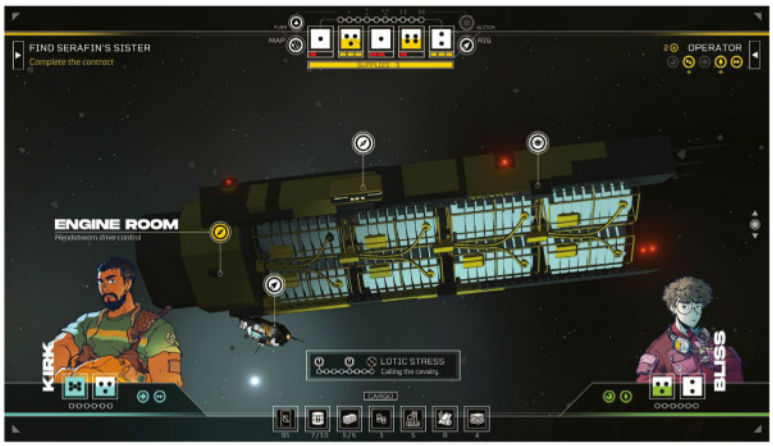
PC GAMER VERDICT

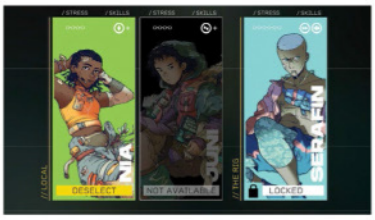
Citizen Sleeper 2's broader scope stretches its mechanics thin, even while its story flourishes.

80





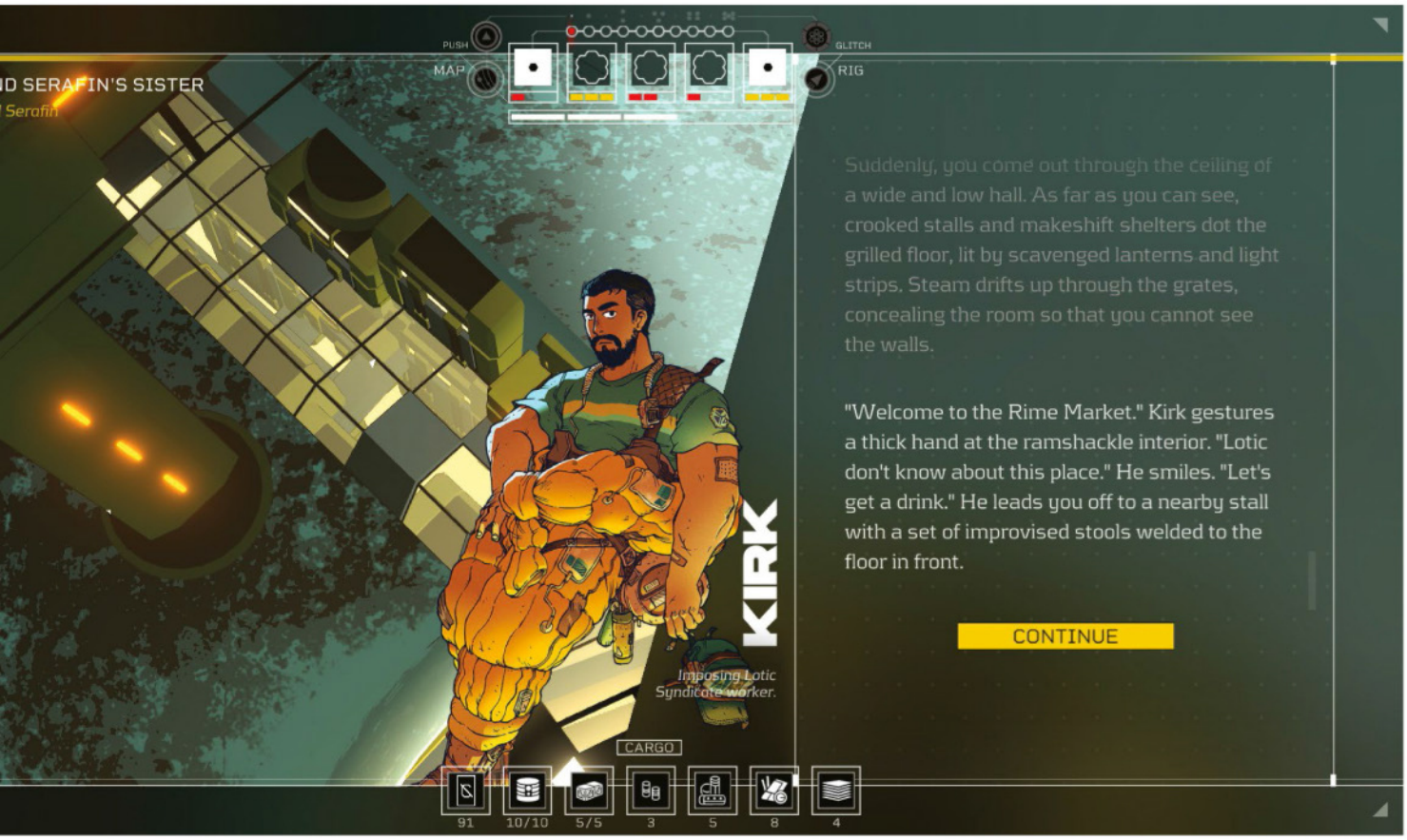




ABOVE: Serafin: your trusty pilot and altogether real one.

FAR LEFT: Contracts have their own stress bars, sometimes. Don't fill 'em.

BELOW: Kirk's got a union he'd like you to join.



CLOUDY DAY

FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH tries to convince you it's moving

By Baxter Burchill

Final Fantasy VII Rebirth gave me the world's most luxurious vacation. From cruises, to resorts, to the world's greatest amusement park, I was shuffled like a hurried tourist from one dazzling experience to the next, showered with endless shiny new things to admire. But the indoor kid in me must be too strong, because it didn't take long before I was tired of all the sights and sounds and just wanted to go home.

The middle entry in Square Enix's ambitious planned trilogy remaking one of the most iconic games of all time, *Rebirth* sees the cast of 2020's *Final Fantasy VII Remake* on the road, having escaped from the industrial city Midgar to travel the world and hunt down the evil hottie Sephiroth. As Square Enix proudly claims, it's a "standalone game that welcomes fans and newcomers alike" and – wait, are we sure about that?

I don't know how Square Enix got that idea in its head, but take it from me: *Rebirth* is the most sequel a sequel has ever sequeled. There's a video summary you can watch to get yourself up to speed, but once you hit New Game all bets are off, with anyone unlucky enough to start here plunged headfirst into the complex world-building and character arcs that've already been stacking up for 40+ hours or 28 years, depending on how you look at it. And that's to say nothing of the incidental *Remake* faces you'll encounter. It seems like the population of Midgar decided to leave with the main cast, because I was finding folks I could barely remember, and just as many that I couldn't at all.

This isn't the second entry in a series, it's the latest chapter in a saga

Rebirth isn't shy about bringing in ideas and folks from the game's wider universe, known as the Compilation of *Final Fantasy VII*. This isn't just the second entry in a series, it's the latest chapter in a saga with decades of ever-expanding lore. It wants you to experience the 1997 original, to watch the movie, to read the spin-off books and to play the battle royale mobile game that's already been shut down. *Rebirth* is the *Final Fantasy VII* cruise: everybody is here, and you're stuck on the boat, the extra lore baggage only confusing an overly complicated plot with knowing nods and the vague idea of a mystery slowing the ship to a crawl.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An expansive reimagining of an RPG classic

EXPECT TO PAY
£65

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-13700F, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060 Ti

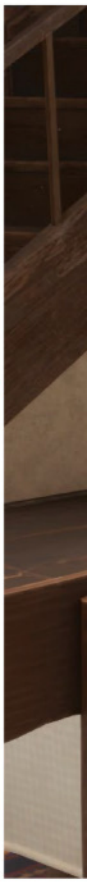
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
ffVII.square-enix-games.com/en-us/games/rebirth

(NOT) A SMALL WORLD

In keeping with a game that's proudly unrestrained, the heroes are now free from the constrictive streets and slums of Midgar. Ditching tight corridors for massive open-world zones, *Rebirth* highlights *Final Fantasy VII*'s environmentalist message by constantly dwarfing the player in a lush, vibrant world. Look left and see giant snow-capped mountains; look right and admire the wrecked ruins of a gigantic boat in the ever-expanding ocean. It doesn't matter where you are or where you point the camera, the action in *Rebirth* is framed by the awe-inspiring hugeness of nature. The world of Gaia is beautiful, and unshackled from the constraints of the PS5 is able to sing the way it was always meant to – previously shoddy framerates now uncapped and low resolutions made crystal clear.

Throw in a contender for the greatest soundtrack in *Final Fantasy* history – packed with rousing choirs, prog rock noodling, and even an electropop bop about a very, very good pup – and *Rebirth* becomes one of those rare games where just looking at a digital landscape is enough to get me a bit emotional.



EXPLORING THE COMPILATION *Final Fantasy VII is so much more than just itself*

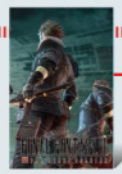
1997 FINAL FANTASY VII
The original classic, about eco-terrorism, capitalism, and Jungian psychology.

2004 BEFORE CRISIS: FINAL FANTASY VII
This game was only released in Japan, but was the start of *FFVII*'s expanded universe.

2005 FINAL FANTASY VII: ADVENT CHILDREN
The movie sequel to the original ups the action and angst to gravity-defying levels.

2007 CRISIS CORE: FINAL FANTASY VII
A prequel focusing on fan-favourite Zack, has slot machine battles and stars Gackt.

2020 FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE
The beginning of Square Enix's ambitious remake (but also kind of a sequel?) trilogy.



2021 FINAL FANTASY VII: THE FIRST SOLDIER
What if *FFVII* was a battle royale shooter? Answer: a game that closed its servers after 14 months.

ABOVE: Iconic scenes are given a fresh coat of polygons.

FAR LEFT: It's a beautiful world out there.

BELOW: Finally, a character who really gets me.

FAR RIGHT: Photo mode is a bit constrained, but still delivers the goods.

BELOW: Release Queen's Blood on mobile already, Square Enix!

Gazing out at rolling hills packed with flowers, the lifestream of the planet escaping the earth in delicate green wisps as the iconic overworld theme sings in the background and I can't help but let all sorts of cornball sentiments about the beauty of our planet well up in me.

Tragically, unlike the wonder these vistas inspire, the activities you can find in them are as plain as they come. The ever-obnoxious Chadley returns from *Remake* to constantly interrupt your adventuring so he can tell you about his world intel activities, which amount to little more than bland busywork. Here I am in the most beautiful locales I've ever seen, ignoring them to scan the ground for materials and hidden lifestream pools, or climb towers to reveal more of the map. This needless padding quickly wore on my patience.

FANTASTIC FIGHTS

Luckily for *Rebirth*, any grumbling about picking up another piece of grass vanishes the second I get into battle. Building on the foundations set up in *Remake*, *Rebirth* combines lightning-quick real-time action with the ATB-based menuing the *Final Fantasy* series is famous for. Every action – every swing of the sword into a skull or blocking of a bullet – builds up a meter that, when full, lets you jump into super slow-motion to hurry through menus to select an ability or spell to unleash. The result is the chess boxing of RPG battle systems, a beautiful ebb and flow rhythm that rewards my love of turn-based tactics while also satisfying my primal desire to go ham on the controller.

With each member of the party playing so differently from one another that any of them could star in their own action game, these brawls also end up as perfect personality showcases for one of the strongest casts in gaming. The same goes for relationships, highlighted with the introduction of tag-team synergy attacks packed with enough fan service to convince any *FFVII* lover that they've found heaven. Aerith throwing on some shades to pose with Barrett is so charming that I was ready to marry the game.

But beyond the rhythm and personality, the secret that kept me hooked on the battle system lies in the art of the pause. Every single time I open up that menu and slow time down to a crawl, the battlefield finds itself in some unspeakably awesome configuration. The gauge fills up and suddenly I'm looking at a bullet whizz inches from Cloud's face as he buries his giant sword in some poor sap, Barrett in the background gunning down a monster bird; a second later I'm pausing again and Cloud is a mile away in the sky, letting the weight of the sword turn him into a flying death machine while Tifa pops a baddie up to him with a flashy uppercut. Fights in *Rebirth* are diorama generators, infinite gardens of delight for the videogame photographer.

Suddenly I'm looking at a bullet whizz inches from Cloud's face

LITTLE AMUSEMENTS

What a shame you spend so much time doing everything but fighting, then. Beyond its obsession with open world activities, *Rebirth* also boasts what feels like a *Mario Party*'s worth of minigames. Some, like Queen's Blood, are more than good enough to be released as standalone games, while others, like gliding chocobos through *Superman 64* hoops are... less inspired. I appreciate the sheer variety packed into *Rebirth*, but at some point – around when I was forced to ride a finicky Segway and play *Rocket League But With Dogs* – I was begging for the game to get on with it, already. And that's ultimately my big issue with *Rebirth*. It doesn't have anywhere to go.

Rebirth has the unenviable task of being the middle part of a trilogy that probably shouldn't have been a trilogy in the first place. Stuck adapting not a whole lot of story, the game has to find some way to justify itself, and it tries to do that with too many mindless activities in open fields, too many extended minigame breaks, and Cait Sith deciding that you have to suffer through an entirely pointless dungeon just because.

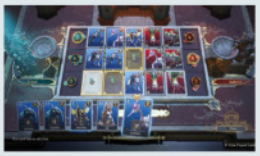
GONE GAGA

Narratively, *Rebirth* tries its best to disguise this issue by taking an increasing interest in sophomoric multiverse plays that exist only to create puzzle boxes for the audience to ponder over. But pry those boxes open, and what's inside? Absolutely nothing. For as much as the game wants to be a commentary on its own legacy, how *Final Fantasy VII* has evolved beyond its creators over the decades, it pulls back every time it inches towards saying anything of interest on the topic. It's hungry for change, but too wrapped up in its own reverence, too afraid of betraying its legacy, to take that necessary step forward.

Being so devoted to *Final Fantasy VII* means that there's a lot of love to be found in *Rebirth*. And as a fan of that original game, it was so easy, for a while at least, to be swept up in the dazzling sights of Gaia, in the vibrant amusement park of games and sidequests at my fingertips, to hop on this rollercoaster journey with many of my all-time favourite characters and give myself to the joy of being able to spend more time with them. But all the charm and pageantry in the world can only distract me for so long before I realise: nothing has happened this whole time. The ship hasn't even left the dock. ■

MINIGAME MAYHEM

Just some of the activities to find in Gaia



QUEEN'S BLOOD
A card game about board control so addictive that you might forget to save the world.

MOOGLE MISCHIEF
Herd a whole family of the franchise's mascot back into their mushroom homes.

FORT CONDOR
Sucked into a tower defence game, everyone returns to their blocky designs of yesteryear.

DOLPHIN SHOW
What adventure is complete without wave racing on the back of your dolphin buddy?

PC GAMER VERDICT

***Final Fantasy VII Rebirth*'s strong characters and combat can't hide poor pacing and a story with nowhere to go.**

68

SNOW MERCY

LONELY MOUNTAINS: SNOW RIDERS combines tense downhill skiing with icy cosiness

By Shaun Prescott

For the first couple of hours spent playing *Lonely Mountains: Snow Riders*, I really wished I was playing its bike-centric predecessor, *Lonely Mountains: Downhill*, instead. Skis are clumsier than bikes and they don't get fast quite as quickly. But I gradually learned the orthodoxies of going fast down technical hills on skis, and once I figured out how to go faster quicker, *Snow Riders* started to click gloriously into place, to the extent that now I think I love skis more than bikes.

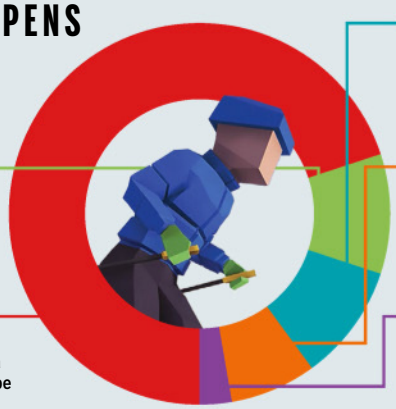
First I learned that to gain speed quickly, I need to go downhill first without crouching, and then tuck in tight to become a human bullet. My next lesson was one the loading screens constantly reminded me about, but I was slow to learn: braking is important. On a bike, brakes slow the bike down, and at super high speeds this is more likely to lead to imprecision if not death. It's kinda the same on skis, but with the right know-how applied, and with fast reflexes, I can usually maintain my speed while taking some of the trickier pins and bends. There are a lot more subtleties to learn, such as the benefits of skiing backwards, and the finer details of the trick system, but my point is that eventually I came to love skiing.

A reflex-oriented cosy game with bucket loads of failure

Like its predecessor, each of the 12 handmade point-to-point tracks in *Snow Riders* is viewed from a fixed camera perspective. Sometimes the camera hovers behind my skier, sometimes it takes an isometric view, and quite often it floats ridiculously in front. This lends the *Lonely Mountains* games a dreamlike cinematic mood, but it also emphasises that these zen games have little truck with realism. *Snow Riders* doesn't try to be a skiing simulator. It focuses instead on evoking the myriad conflicting moods of high-risk high-reward pursuits. I would describe *Snow Riders* as a reflex-oriented cosy game with bucket loads of failure.

There is tons of tension in *Snow Riders*, but it's alleviated in two ways. The first is by avoiding the pressure altogether. There's a zen mode that just lets me muck around on any track I like, even if I haven't unlocked them in the campaign. In zen mode, I can also place checkpoints wherever I like on a map, which not only eliminates the frustration of repeating difficult sections, but also lets me focus on the joy of hurtling fast down hills without death or clever wayfinding occupying my mind.

WHAT HAPPENS IN SNOW RIDERS



10% DYING
You'll spend a lot of time watching your ragdoll tumble down cliffs.

70% SKIING
Perhaps obvious, for a skiing game, but maybe you'd expect a higher percentage for this?

10% EXPERIMENTING
Sometimes you won't want to break records: it's fun to explore routes.

7% GETTING FANCY
Every new level usually grants new cosmetics, which you can flaunt.

3% LOOKING FOR REST AREAS
There are secreted away areas you can find to just chill in.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Reflex-oriented downhill skiing that nevertheless manages to feel chill

EXPECT TO PAY
£22.50

DEVELOPER
Megagon Industries

PUBLISHER
Megagon Industries

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2545360/Lonely_Mountains_Snow_Riders/

ATMOSPHERIC

The second cosy aspect is just the vibe. *Snow Riders* is just a gorgeously atmospheric game. Instead of music, we hear the gentle winds of lethal cliff-scapes; instead of V8 engines, we hear the mushy drones of skidding blades and disrupted snow.

But don't get me wrong: *Lonely Mountains* is also an incredibly tough dexterity-testing racer for those who seek challenge, and this sequel places extra emphasis on this thanks to its online competitive modes. There's a realtime racing mode for up to eight players, as well as a cooperative mode that grants six manually placed checkpoints to the team and tasks them with earning as many points without dying as possible, with all points banked at checkpoints. The races feel a lot like the core game, and I can see myself coming to this again and again, though the cooperative mode feels a little at odds with the unfussiness of the rest of the game.

Amid all the learning needed to pull off a successful run, lies *Snow Riders*' secret ingredient: the quiet. There's no effort to compensate for the awkward aural peace of skiing, no burgeoning strings or loud breakbeats. *Snow Riders* luxuriates in the lofty drone of skis against impossible mountains. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Lonely Mountains: Snow Riders is beautiful, terrifying, sometimes exhausting, but it never loses its chill.

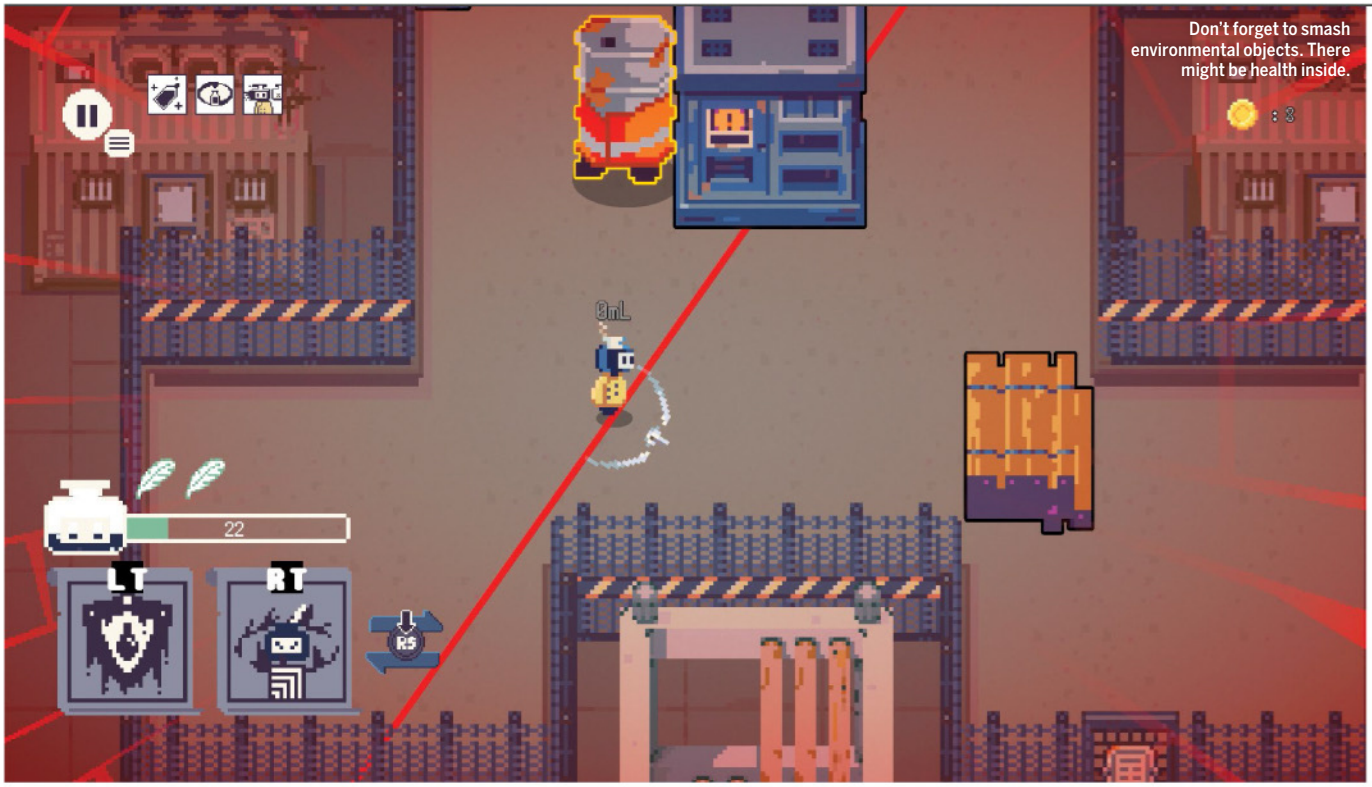
89

Keeping your skies fanned out in the air helps to stay airborne longer.

ABOVE: New level milestones unlock new skis, and they're not just cosmetic: they affect your whole approach to going downhill fast.

BELOW: When you've beaten your friends in online racing, you can watch them try to catch up.

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes



Don't forget to smash environmental objects. There might be health inside.

INK. WELL?

Spilling ink in action roguelike INKING

The ink must flow in top-down action game *InKing*, where you play as an inkwell with an attitude and a deadly fountain pen. By attacking, you leave loads of ink on the floor, but this is the fuel for your special moves. Slather the stuff around each boxy arena, then hoover it up to pull off ink-based attacks. If *Splatoon* ever gets a *Hades*-style spinoff, it will look a lot like this.

But that central gimmick does make *InKing* feel fresh. As well as trying to create space, and close it, as you dash away from, then wail on your enemies, you also have to remember to splodge ink all over the carpet. More ink means more powerful special moves, but it takes a while to cover the whole dang floor, so a better tactic might be to spill little and often.

So you drop ink onto just this empty corner, sucking it up into a shield to protect your vanishing health. And while the cooldown for your slash attack ticks down, you dash some distance between yourself and these sentient hammers. Hooray – your ultra move is ready. That fires a torrent of ink at a foe, by the way. That takes care of this final murderous tyre, leaving you free to bash open the safe to reveal your upgrades.

The essentials of *InKing* feel great – the movement, the fighting, it all feels polished. There are several possible synergies based on the starting abilities and upgrades acquired along the way. One upgrade ticks down your health constantly, but lets you recharge it by attacking enemies. Another makes you drop ink every time you move.

There are several possible synergies based on the starting abilities

INVISIBLE INK

Still, this is nowhere near as well-featured as something like *Hades* or *Dead Cells* – there's no overall progression beyond a rudimentary list of unexciting stat upgrades. Not that you expected that from a small, free game – but it could still do with a few more options at the start. As it stands, there are only four abilities to choose from, and no procedural generation to shake up your linear progression.

My biggest beef is to do with the theming, however. You play as a warrior inkwell (the design is very '90s, in an endearing way), but you're fighting through a garage-themed dungeon, and all of the enemies are either walking tools or sentient car parts. It doesn't make a lick of sense.

But while the protagonist should probably be an oil can or something, the varied enemies it faces are never less than delightful. The tottering hammers and brawny oil drums, so murderously cute in their high-vis jackets. The satisfying revving animation as a massive car tyre prepares to run you over. This is not a game with great longevity, but it is a game you'll remember: for its novel combat and the foes you'll meet along the way. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A top-down action roguelike where you play as a walking, walloping inkwell

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Team Digital Toilet

PUBLISHER
Jungle Game Lab

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

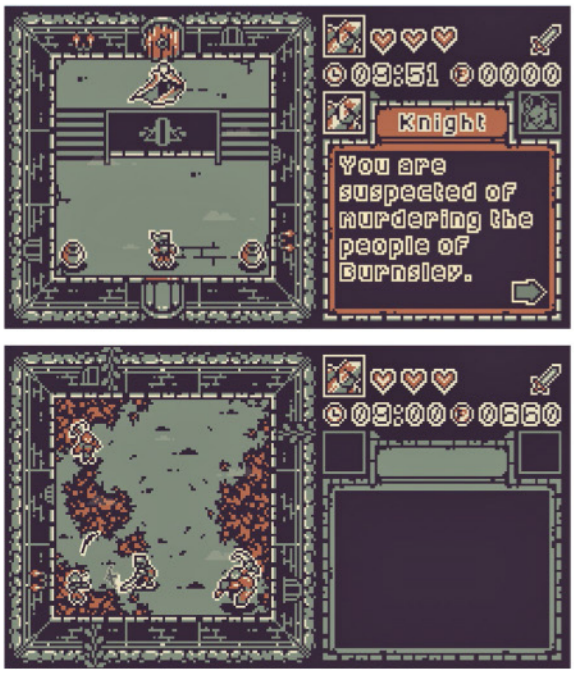
LINK
bit.ly/InKing

PC GAMER VERDICT

The premise doesn't quite make sense, but this is still a fast, stylish action game with adorable enemies.

74

BELOW: Desmond greets you as you enter his castle.



BREATHLESS

Defeat a vampire in DESMOND'S CASTLE

How long can you hold your breath? I just managed a paltry 20 seconds, and I wasn't even swinging a sword or solving a puzzle while I was doing it. This is the talent of the knight protagonist in the *Zelda*-esque *Desmond's Castle*: to hold one's breath while doing combat and exploring a castle.

He's holding his breath because the air is toxic in there. The knight can hold it for exactly ten minutes. Is that enough time to fight through a series of procedurally jumbled rooms containing zombies and simple puzzles? Let's hope so, as that's your mission after you volunteer to free a village from a vampire's curse.

I'll get the bad stuff out of the way first. This replayable, roguelike-ish adventure has a lot of unskippable stuff at the start of the game. It's a bummer to have to hammer through the opening cutscene, to wander to the entrance of the castle, and chat with vampire Desmond every time you want to replay.

That I wanted to replay *Desmond's Castle* brings me onto the good stuff. There's a rollicking momentum informed by the ten-minute time limit, but also by the general briskness of everything. The combat is basic but swift, as you swing at zombies and dodge them in teeny arenas, while the assorted puzzles have been boiled down to their purest essences. The door has vanished in this room. What can you hit to make it reappear? Next, let's hoof it to these obvious switches to open this locked door. While it's nothing alike in style, *Desmond's Castle* has a touch of *WarioWare* about it. ■

72

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Nth Brnd	bit.ly/DesCastle

BALL CONTROL

There's more to XENOSPHERE than meets the eye

I'm going to spoil *Xenosphere* a little bit. But trust me, it will make you want to play it. Nifflas – the developer of *Knytt Stories* – has made a challenging 2D platformer which is an excellent game in its own right, but also a clever story about a streamer.

The twist, soon established, is that a streamer named Neila is playing *Xenosphere*: evident in the camera window in the corner of the screen and the chat box filling up with messages from fans. Neila might be streaming the game, but you're the one really controlling the ball as it careers between floating platforms in a minimalist void.

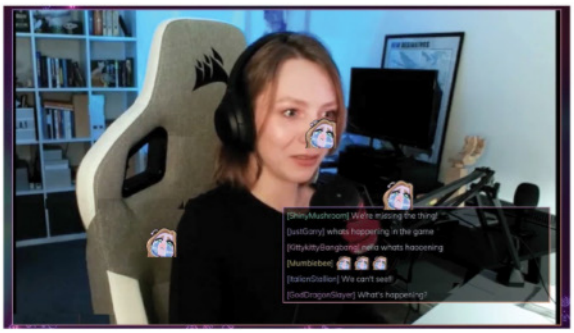
In regards to the fundamentals, the ball's physics and controls are exquisite. There is only one action button, which simultaneously charges up the ball for a dash and causes it to roll gently along a platform, and the game wrings great platforming out of these simple mechanics. The narrative layer sitting atop the ball-flinging action provides a strong incentive to push through its more challenging moments.

Nifflas takes the premise and deviously builds upon it. At first the streaming is just uncannily lifelike, with Neila's comments seeming to sync up perfectly as you ace or fail tough sections.

But then the streaming and game layers begin to interact more closely. Sometimes Neila will pause the game for you – you might be in the middle of a jump! Sometimes chat will ask for the camera window to be moved across the screen. The layers get a lot more intertwined than that. My mouth was hanging open by the end of the game. ■

88

BELOW: The streaming interferes with the action.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Nifflas	bit.ly/Xenosphere

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott

It's less frightening if you imagine Doctor Salvador is dancing like Carlton from Fresh Prince.

SALAZAR'S REVENGE

Dealing with Plaga louts in RESIDENT EVIL 4

It's perhaps unreasonable to have *Resi 4* on pages called They're Back, given that it's been rereleased so many times it doesn't feel like it's ever been away. As both the fundamental laws of physics and the soundtrack of Frozen 2 teach us, some things never change. The iterations will continue until we turn to dust.

This month's theme is organisation, or, more specifically, the act of mindfully putting things in other places. Where else would it be sensible, and indeed encouraged, to store an egg next to a submachine gun? Not at my local farm shop, apparently. And while crisp inventory management is a lesser component of *Resi 4*, it's an excellent excuse to talk about it again, even if it should be the case that there's little left to say about a game that's been released twice since you started reading this page. But, somehow, it retains the power to surprise. What's immediately striking about the return to Valdelobos is how it finds such a beautiful balance between competence and terror. The first three *Resi* games worked because the protagonists were laughably inept. The STARS team feel like they were selected for special forces duty via a postcode lottery. Controlling them was like trying to move an IKEA wardrobe without destroying it. Leon Kennedy, in contrast, is not just capable, but alarmingly flashy. He's all spin kicks, somersaults and laser-sighted headshots. Bro can even take enemies down with a northern lights suplex – a move so technically demanding you rarely even see it in WWE.

Bro can even take enemies down with a northern lights suplex

LEON INTO IT

Controlling someone so adept should stop *Resi 4* from being scary, but it somehow doesn't – a balance the wider franchise has struggled to replicate, never more obviously than in the immediate sequel. It all comes down to pacing, structure, and escalation. There's a sense that every second you waste, a congregation of cleaver-swinging slackjaw yokels are meandering their way towards you with malign intent. At the same time, smashing open every box you find is too tempting a prospect to ignore, so you're often the source of your own problems. It means that the opening sections still manage to be gruelling, even if you're aware of how much worse things are going to get once heads start turning into scything tentacle monsters and you have to drag a squawking trust fund princess around with you.

The variety is fabulous, too: it's a place where chainsaws can sit comfortably alongside mace-swinging monks inspired by the Spanish Inquisition; where mutated fish monsters lurk within every stinking pool and cave trolls are more common than they are in the Mines of Moria. Much like everything in *Resident Evil 5*, it absolutely shouldn't work, but it does. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The game that saved *Resi* and ruined the Spanish tourism industry

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
Capcom

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700, 16 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/254700/Resident_Evil_4_2005/

PC GAMER VERDICT

Urgent, weird, nerve-wracking and ridiculous, it's miraculous that *Resident Evil 4* still has the impact it does.

92

BELOW: Someone, somewhere is looking at this and cursing.

CRATE EXPECTATIONS

The secret war against shelf space in UNPACKING

"Play the zen puzzle game", the deceivers cried through forked tongues. "Just take the things from the boxes and put them on the shelves. What could be stressful about that?" I'll tell you what: literally everything. Hell is discovering a single boot and wondering if the other has been irrevocably lost.

A more charitable way of looking at it is that you'll never know the true joy of reunited footwear if you don't, at first, suspect one is gone, in much the same way that a free evening to play games feels amazing if it's preceded by an extended period of business. I'd say that I'm perhaps overthinking this, but this might be exactly why *Unpacking* isn't especially zen for me, as wonderful as it obviously is. I'm not just putting spoons in drawers: I'm building a functional space for someone. Hard choices must be made. It's a series of obstacles that require definitive action. How do I prioritise one soft toy above another? Is it for me, a mortal man, to decide if Mr Piggles belongs on the bed and Sir Quacking Ducksford in the cupboard? How can I relax if I know I'll have to take the fly spray out of the cupboard every time I want to use the big pot? HOW? The only way to survive is by offsetting these constant, gnawing horrors with pockets of control. The books will be arranged by colour, not by shape; denim stacked in order of darkness; all the undergarments will face in the same direction. In these moments, I can discover and understand the meditative truth of *Unpacking*. That, in this world of towering boxes, there is some solace in making sure that all the bras are nicely arranged. ■

85

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER
£15.50	Witch Beam	Humble Games

MEND GOALS

Getting my fix in ASSEMBLE WITH CARE

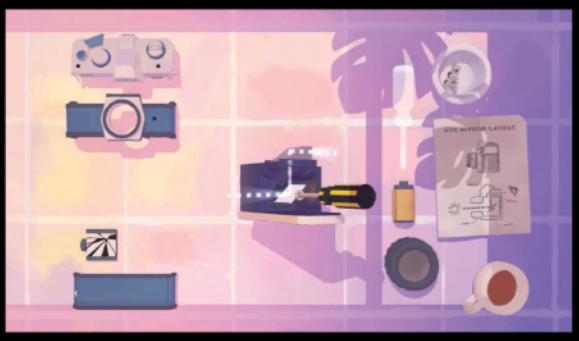
Everything here has a place. Screws go in a little pot. Broken parts have a glowing space to store them. Even the pause screen is accessed via a steaming cup of coffee. It's like an ASMR simulator without the distracting possibility that someone, somewhere is adding you to their secretly horny YouTube playlist.

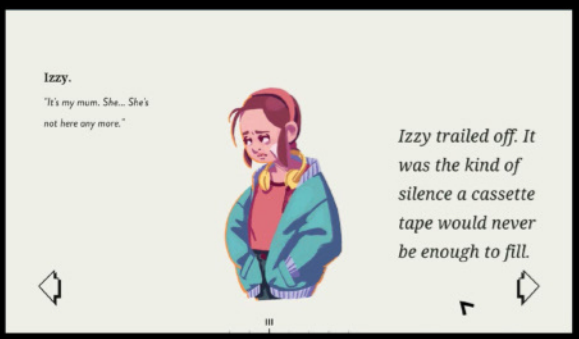
Assemble With Care would be an excellent reminder of how satisfying it is to perform tactile, manual work if I hadn't previously spent two hours trying to fix a dripping tap. So I'll be honest instead: the game's crisp, functional representation of repairs is satisfying in a way that real DIY rarely is. There are no screws here with stripped heads; no ceramic disc tap cartridges that turn slightly farther than they're meant to. Thus far, I haven't felt the need to swear at any inanimate objects or regret my life choices. I fix the things. People say thank you. Or, in some cases, the items remind them of some ongoing trauma. Because as much as *Assemble With Care* is about fixing things, it's also about the stories that surround each item, in much the same way that *Unpacking* is more than just a game about putting socks in drawers. Some of these stories are wonderfully resonant, but there is a sense that it's bulking out what would otherwise be a pleasant, if brief experience. This might be because the act of actually fixing things feels lovely, and I wish there was more of it, to the point that I'm not giving the writing the attention it surely deserves.

Or perhaps I'm just jealous because I didn't get any narrative closure from fixing my knackered bathroom sink. ■

70

BELOW: Look at the screws in that cup and imagine the sound they make.





NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER
£5.80	ustwo games	ustwo games

A TECHNO-THRILLER CO-OP HEIST FPS FROM THE CREATOR OF PAYDAY: THE HEIST, PAYDAY 2 AND GTFO

DEN OF WOLVES

WISHLIST NOW

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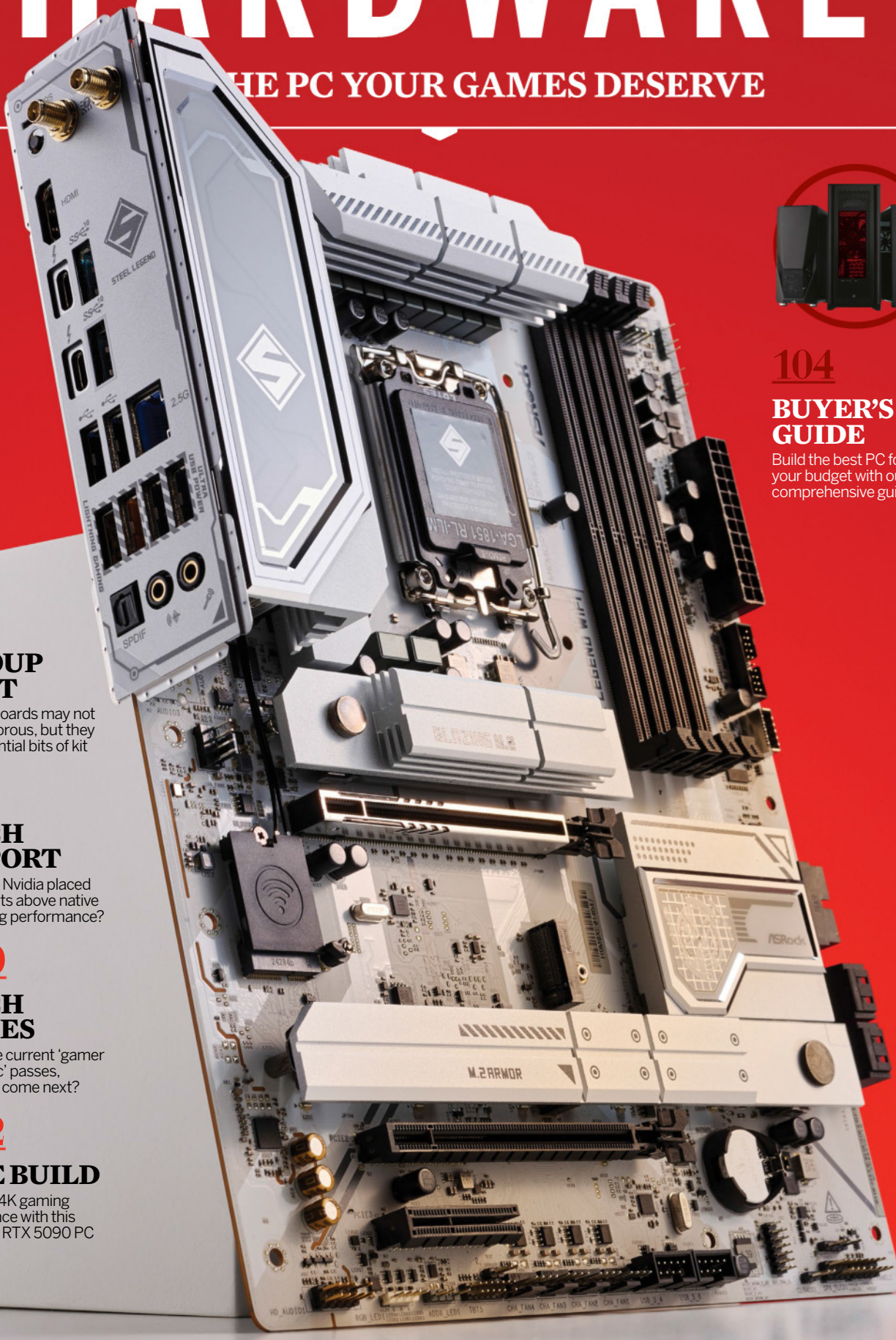
HARDWARE

HE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



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Motherboards may not be glamorous, but they are essential bits of kit

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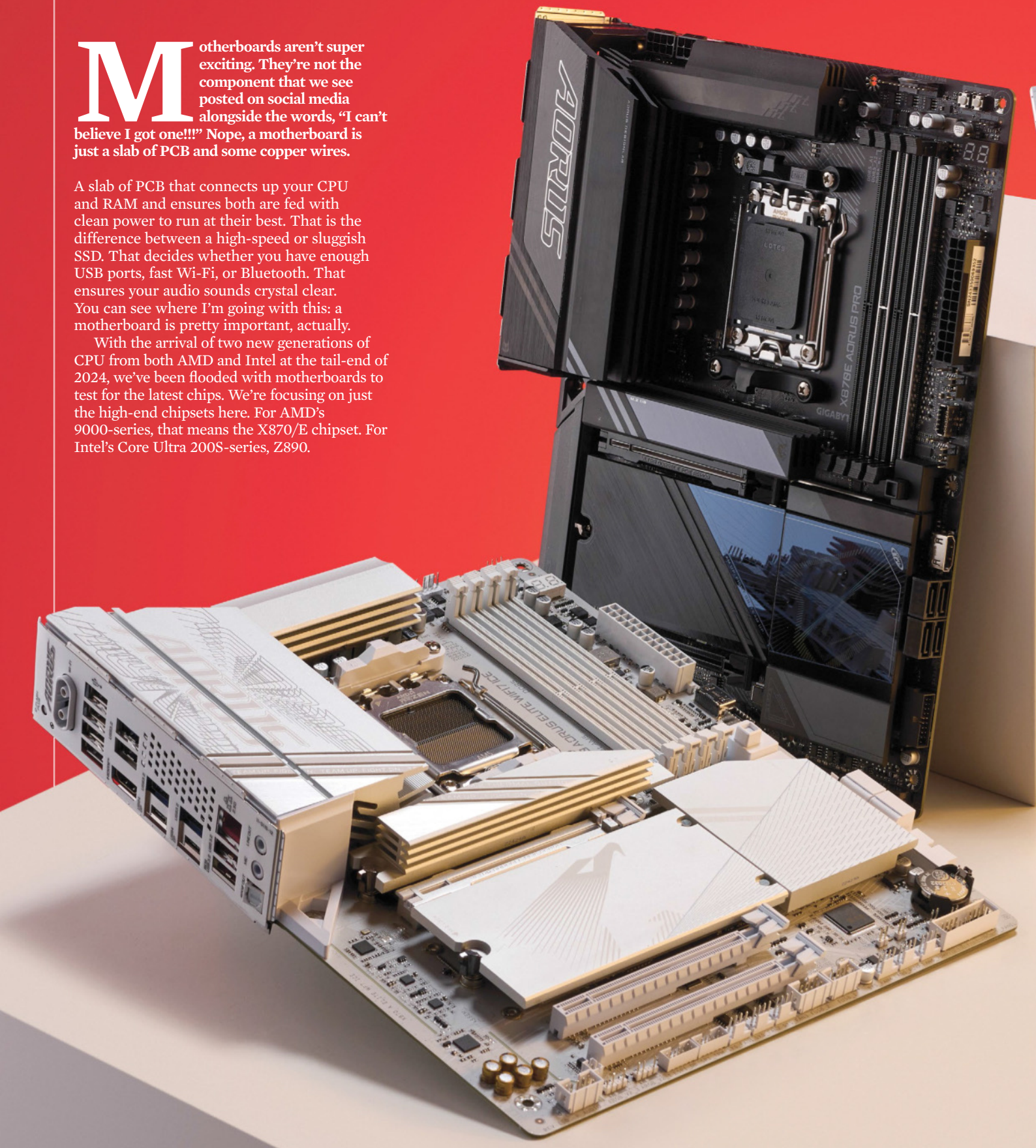
THE BUILD
Achieve 4K gaming dominance with this GeForce RTX 5090 PC

Motherboards aren't super exciting. They're not the component that we see posted on social media alongside the words, "I can't believe I got one!!!" Nope, a motherboard is just a slab of PCB and some copper wires.

A slab of PCB that connects up your CPU and RAM and ensures both are fed with clean power to run at their best. That is the difference between a high-speed or sluggish SSD. That decides whether you have enough USB ports, fast Wi-Fi, or Bluetooth. That ensures your audio sounds crystal clear. You can see where I'm going with this: a motherboard is pretty important, actually.

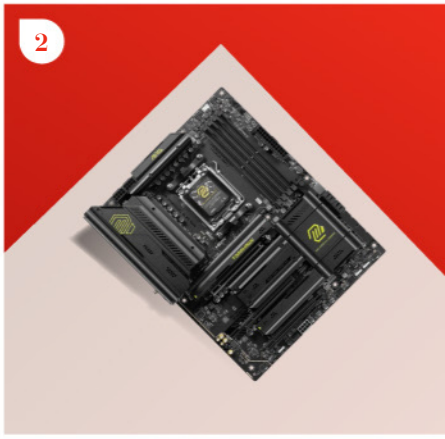
With the arrival of two new generations of CPU from both AMD and Intel at the tail-end of 2024, we've been flooded with motherboards to test for the latest chips. We're focusing on just the high-end chipsets here. For AMD's 9000-series, that means the X870/E chipset. For Intel's Core Ultra 200S-series, Z890.



GROUP TEST

MOTHERBOARDS

An often overlooked component, these clever boards take the hassle out of building a gaming PC. ***By Jacob Ridley***



Z890 Steel Legend WiFi

ASROCK £254

Tastefully lit

1 Intel's Arrow Lake chips are a tough sell, though if you've somehow ended up with one, I've got just the motherboard for you. This Steel Legend offers up a rare white and grey colourway, which looks supremely good in a matching case, though the RGB lightstrip that runs from edge to edge beneath the bottom M.2. slot is a standout feature in any situation. Enough about the looks. I was most impressed with the Steel Legend when I peeled off the top SSD heatsink with the integrated latch. It's such a simple solution, it makes you wonder why anyone ever bothered with screws in the first place. There are four M.2 slots, too, including one rated for PCIe 5.0, which might actually be useful in 2025 as cheaper PCIe 5.0 drives are to be expected.

The Steel Legend doesn't let up with a large number of ports on the rear IO, including twin Thunderbolt 4 ports, and Wi-Fi 7 support. Altogether, it's a snug fit for Intel CPUs and a solid core for an Arrow Lake machine.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- RGB looks great
- Easy SSD access
- Reasonable price

SPECS SIZE: ATX / **SOCKET:** LGA1851 / **REAR USB/THUNDERBOLT PORTS:** 10 / **M.2 SLOTS:** 4 / **WI-FI:** 7 / **VRM:** 18+1+1+1+1

MAG X870 Tomahawk WiFi

MSI £280

Best of the bunch

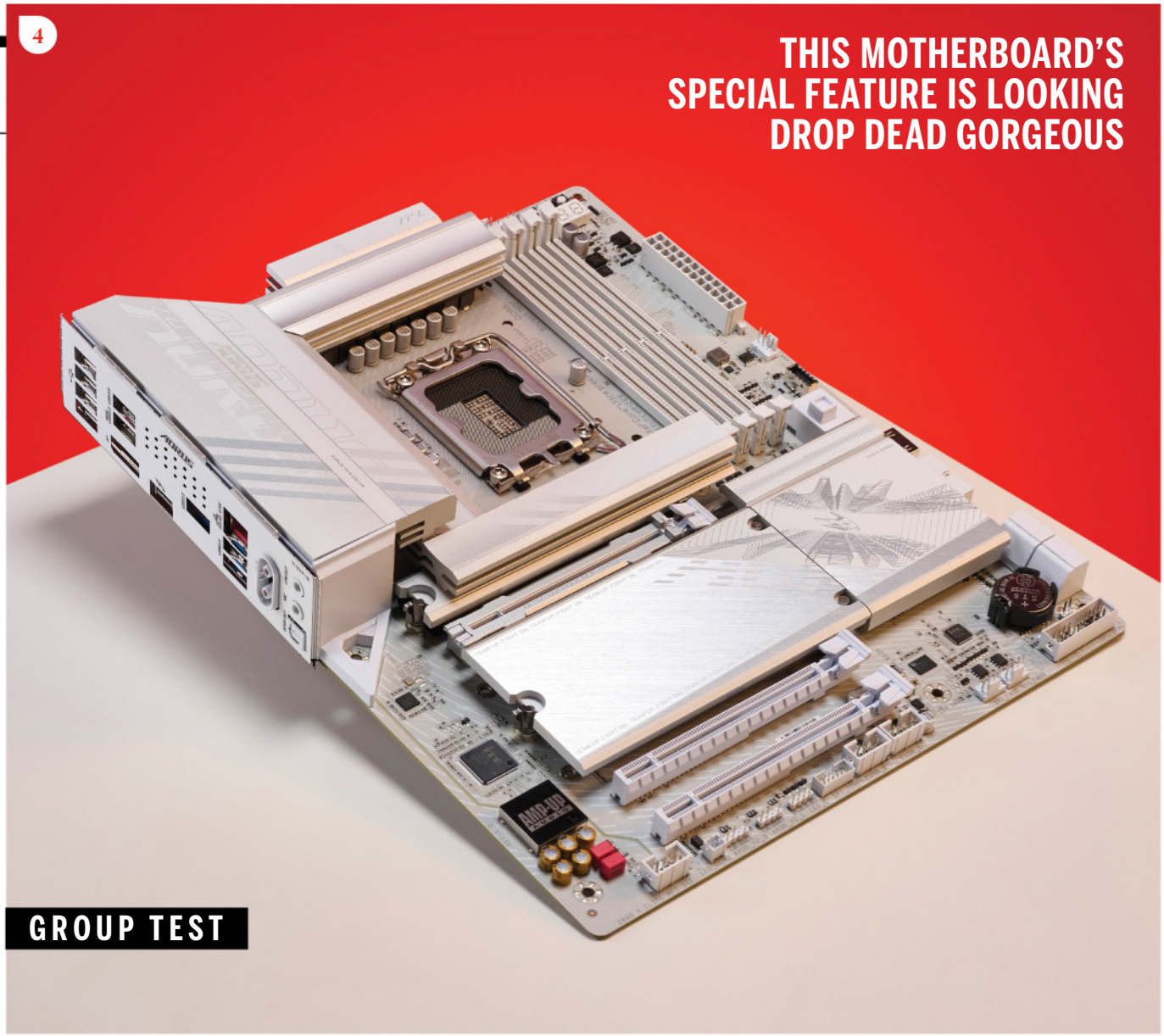
2 You can easily go overboard with a motherboard. A smarter move is to find one that offers many of the genuinely useful high-end features without the colossal price tag. That's why we like this MSI MAG X870 Tomahawk – it's convenient, high-end, and doesn't cost a fortune. For starters, the build quality is fantastic here. There's a wealth of plating across the board and adequate cooling for both VRM and SSD. Both the SSD and GPU are a breeze to access, too, thanks to quick release mechanisms. It feels as much a high-end motherboard as we'd like it to be, considering it still costs a good chunk of change. One of the main factors in deciding whether to buy any motherboard is how many USB ports and M.2. slots it has. Luckily for MSI, this Tomahawk has plenty of both. There are two USB4 ports, for the most bandwidth hungry stuff, and ten more of various speeds for everything else. The four M.2 slots are icing on the cake. Yep, this motherboard offers everything you need for a AMD-powered gaming PC.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Tons of ports
- Good thermals
- Easy to set-up

SPECS SIZE: ATX / **SOCKET:** AM5 / **REAR USB/THUNDERBOLT PORTS:** 12 / **M.2 SLOTS:** 4 / **WI-FI:** 7 / **VRM:** 14+2+1

THIS MOTHERBOARD'S SPECIAL FEATURE IS LOOKING DROP DEAD GORGEOUS



GROUP TEST

X870E Aorus Pro

GIGABYTE **£330**

PCIe 5.0 galore

3 PCIe 5.0 SSDs deliver much higher maximum bandwidth versus more common PCIe 4.0 drives. In the realm of 10,00-12,000 MB/s. The problem is that's only really good on paper, or rare occurrences when you're transferring files between two PCIe 5.0 drives. In other key metrics, such as random 4K IOPS, the humble PCIe 4.0 drive works nearly as well, and for a whole lot less money/heat.

Why does any of this matter for the Aorus Pro? Well, what this capable motherboard offers is a way to tap into the benefits of PCIe 5.0 with three high-speed M.2 slots to choose from. With at least two occupied, you can benefit from those higher sequential speeds. However, if you use the second of third NVMe slots, you will have to halve the first PCIe slot, from x16 to x8, which might see you lose a small amount of performance.

So, is it worth it? The Aorus Pro is very well equipped and I do appreciate its clean aesthetic, but I struggle to justify the multitude of PCIe 5.0 slots, especially when others offer competitive packages for less.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- 3x PCIe 5.0 NVMe slots
- Gorgeous
- Do you need all that?

SPECS SIZE: ATX / **SOCKET:** AM5 / **REAR USB/THUNDERBOLT PORTS:** 11 / **M.2 SLOTS:** 4 / **WI-FI:** 7 / **VRM:** 16+2+2

Z890 Aorus Elite WiFi 7 Ice

GIGABYTE **£280**

Blue steel

4 Here we are, then. The more sensible Gigabyte option, though this one is intended for Intel's Core Ultra processors rather than AMD's chips. We have this motherboard's almost identical AM5 twin right over the page in this group test, which means we have both major manufacturers covered on the same board for comparison.

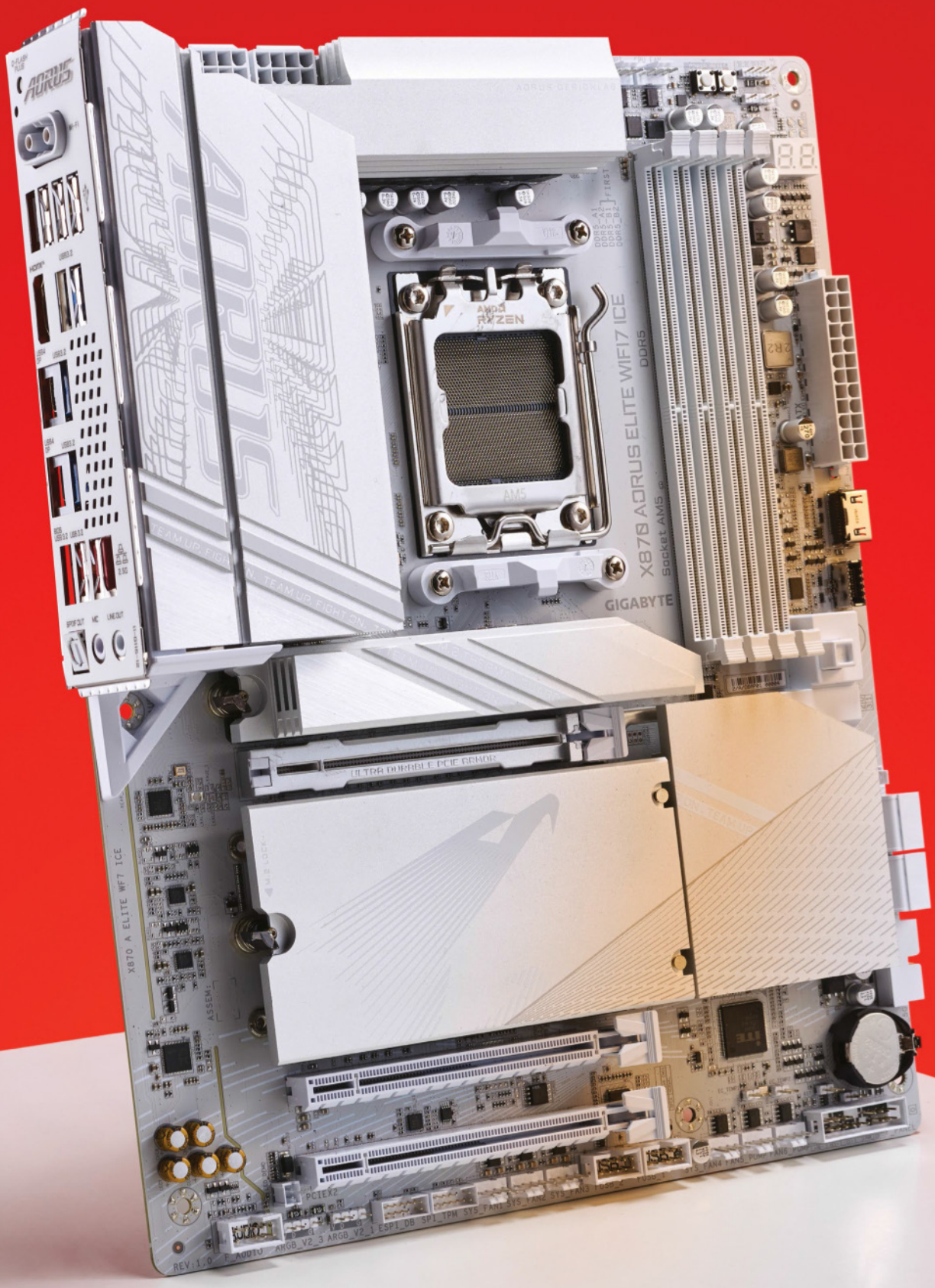
This motherboard's special feature is looking drop dead gorgeous, obviously. The subtle lighting is one thing, but combine this silver and white motherboard with a white chassis and you're going to be the envy of the town. Thankfully, this motherboard isn't just stylish, it has substance too.

The VRM is not quite the same as the Pro model, but it's solid. It also lacks the many PCIe 5.0 NVMe SSD slots found on the Pro model, but I'm fine with that too. The Elite still offers four NVMe slots, one of which is rated to PCIe 5.0 speeds, which will suffice. Though I am a little disappointed in the selection of USB ports on the rear: only one Type-C, in 2025? Even if it's Thunderbolt, I want more.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Looks great
- Smart spec
- Only one USB Type-C on the rear

SPECS SIZE: ATX / **SOCKET:** LGA1851 / **REAR USB/THUNDERBOLT PORTS:** 10 / **M.2 SLOTS:** 4 / **WI-FI:** 7 / **VRM:** 16+1+2



GIGABYTE CAN OFFER THREE PCIE 5.0 NVME SSD SLOTS ON THE AMD VERSION

BY THE NUMBERS

	X870	X870E	Z890
COMPATIBILITY	Ryzen 7000, 8000, 9000	Ryzen 7000, 8000, 9000	Intel Core Ultra 200S
NO. OF USB PORTS (3.0 OR ABOVE)	8	14	12
SOCKET	AM5	AM5	LGA1851
PCIE LANES (TOTAL)	44	36	24

X870 Aorus Elite WiFi 7 Ice

GIGABYTE £277

Same same, but different

5 The Gigabyte X870 Aorus Elite WiFi 7 Ice isn't a carbon copy of the Intel version except made for AMD Ryzen chips. They don't even look the same. What's more, while history would traditionally see the Intel version weirdly better than the AMD version just because, this is the other way around. The AMD version rocks. Thanks to the X870 chipset, Gigabyte can offer three PCIe 5.0 NVMe SSD slots on the AMD version of this board. That makes Intel's single slot look rather pedestrian. Sure, I still don't think you need three PCIe 5.0 slots, but unlike the X870E Aorus Pro this motherboard doesn't charge you for it. Once again, you have to decide between having an x16 or x8 PCIe slot or the extra SSDs, but that's your call. There are other key differentiators. The VRM on the AMD version is a 16+2+2 configuration, much like the Aorus Pro, and it has 12 USB ports on the rear IO. Two of which are USB Type-C, which was one of my main complaints with the Intel version. So, if you needed any further convincing to go AMD this time around, here it is.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Not identical to the Intel version
- Better, actually
- 3x PCIe 5.0 slots

SPECS SIZE: ATX / **SOCKET:** AM5 / **REAR USB/THUNDERBOLT PORTS:** 12 / **M.2 SLOTS:** 4 / **WI-FI:** 7 / **VRM:** 16+2+2

ROG Strix X870-I Gaming WiFi

ASUS £420

So sweet

6 One look at this Mini-ITX motherboard and I was sold. I don't always love the ROG style on a motherboard, but this? This I like. With limited space, Asus has crafted a masterpiece of traces and capacitors, matched only by this motherboard's similarly mega price tag. My appreciation only goes skin-deep but there's more to this compact board than meets the eye. It's tiny, which makes the fact there are two NVMe slots stacked atop of one another even more impressive. The IO has a small fan to keep the mass of stuffed squeezed shoulder to shoulder cool, though it's not noticeably loud like some of its stature. It also comes with more USB ports than you'd expect. A handful of expansion options help this Mini-ITX compete with the big boys. There's the small expansion board that plugs in to the two USB Type-C ports, and there's the Hive that sits externally and adds a pair of USB ports, among other functions. Though I have to mention this board's size means it lacks in some ways, which is a tough pill to swallow when you're paying a massive price.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Adorable
- Amazing
- A-expensive

SPECS SIZE: MINI-ITX / **SOCKET:** AM5 / **REAR USB/THUNDERBOLT PORTS:** 10 / **M.2 SLOTS:** 2 / **WI-FI:** 7 / **VRM:** 10+2+1

Why wasn't native rendering the 5090's headline feature? Because Nvidia changed direction long ago.

SOFT LAUNCH

Nvidia's 5-SERIES launch placed AI benefits above native rendering. Why?

After all those months of waiting, of slightly mistranslated speculative reports and questionable photos of graphics cards in unnamed factory floors, the 5-series family had gone public. Hooray! And in several cases, the speculation was bang on: Nvidia's new flagship gaming card, the RTX 5090, cost a shade under £2,000, featured 32GB of memory as many pre-launch reports suggested, and would you believe it, it offered a significant performance advantage over the RTX 4090.

At least, that was the inference behind all the bar charts and the split-screen videos Nvidia released to accompany the 5090's launch at CES. But upon slightly closer inspection, the quadrupled performance in games like *Alan Wake 2* and the longstanding benchmark for neon signs reflecting in puddles that is *Cyberpunk 2077* are the result not of native rendering performance, but of AI-generated frames.

And that caused a collective furrowing of brows and grinding of teeth in certain corners of the community. Understandably so: these are expensive graphics cards Nvidia's bringing to market. We're paying for hardware, but being convinced of that hardware's virtues by the performance of software. The software in question is the new Multi-Frame Generation mode, only available on 5-series cards. As its name cunningly implies, you get three AI-generated frames with this tech for every one that 4-series cards are capable of. Hence all those bar charts with quadrupled framerates.

It wasn't a surprise that this didn't go down well. Because however close AI-generated frames get to their crisp, natively rendered counterparts, they're not indistinguishable. The advent of a new graphics card generation has always heralded a breakthrough in native rendering performance previously, but this time it seemed that the compelling reason to buy a 5-series GPU would be for the Multi-Frame Generation software, exclusive to Blackwell architecture because of the way it activates multiple AI models to generate those frames.

CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK

We shouldn't have been surprised. Nvidia has been pursuing this direction instead of native, on-die performance gains since 2018 now when the RTX 2-series launched. At the time, as we all remember, real-time ray tracing was the big sell. A movie CG-like lighting technique, we were told, which would utterly transform our games.

There were caveats. The library of games that supported ray tracing was limited when the 2-series launched, and the demands it placed on those cards tended to limit the usage in a particular scene to a few reflective puddles or windows. But there was an answer: a new, AI-driven software solution called

Four score

Although Multi-Frame Gen remains exclusive to 5-series cards for... reasons, 4-series owners are thrown a bone in the form of upgraded single Frame Gen tech, which promises higher-fidelity AI frames at a lower VRAM cost, resulting in a modest performance upgrade when running Frame Gen in supported titles. It does beg the question, though: if Nvidia's able to increase the performance of your existing card by rolling out a software update, why are we supposed to buy new GPUs again?

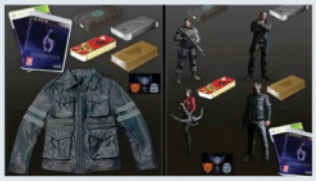
FAR LEFT: Admittedly, it's an attractive slab of silicon. Those tasteful grilles. The symmetry.

LEFT: *Metro Exodus* was the first game with global ray tracing support. Six years later, it's still not commonplace.

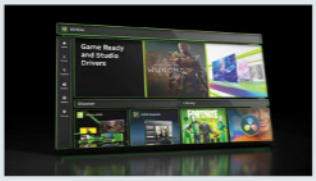
SPARE CHANGE *Four other ways to spend £2,000*

THIS 2006 SUBARU LEGACY
105,000 miles on the clock. MOT pass doubtful. But will a 5090 drive you to work?

A BALENCIAGA HANDBAG
Room for four-fifths of a smartphone inside, and £200 shy of £2K. Bargain.



ALMOST TWO RESI 6 COLLECTORS' EDITIONS
Disappointing action game with some tat and a leather jacket? £1,300, please.



14 NVIDIA SHARES
Invert the relationship and profit from Team Green's success. Buy high, sell... higher?

DLSS which let you run your game at a lower native resolution than usual, lowering the overall performance demands, then upscale the frames back up to your desired resolution.

The parallels are right there with the 5-series launch, aren't they? Gradually, we've become accustomed to making a small tradeoff in fidelity in order to hit higher framerates, and in doing so, we've forgotten that these £2,000 graphics cards we keep being asked to buy should be giving us a means of playing our games without compromise.

Unfortunately, the sound of disgruntled PC gamers is unlikely to dissuade Nvidia – not to mention contemporary AMD, which is been just as keen on AI-based performance solutions – from pursuing this direction. Jensen Huang's pivot towards powering AI technologies via Nvidia hardware has seen the company stock skyrocket to fairytale levels, so it makes perfect sense to solve the problem of rendering higher fidelity games using AI, too.

IT ACTIVATES MULTIPLE AI MODELS TO GENERATE THOSE FRAMES

What the duration of this continuing trend grants us, though, is the data to interpolate how the 5-series' lifespan might play out, by looking at how the promises played out versus the reality of RTX's 2, 3, and 4-series cards.

Ray tracing. It's more present in PC games today than it was when it arrived circa 2018. The library of supported games has definitely grown a lot, and along the way we've enjoyed some standout titles like *Cyberpunk 2077*, *Minecraft*, *Control*, and the *Quake II* and *Portal* RTX releases. The latter two, however, were made with direct involvement from Nvidia itself. By and large, ray tracing's appearance is subtler and less transformative, adding better reflections and nuanced lighting to scenes in the likes of Sony's *Spider-Man* remaster or *Returnal*, without ever truly stopping you in your tracks to say, "Get a load of that ray tracing!"

PROMISES, PROMISES

That's an important point, although a subjective one. Perhaps you disagree and think that modern games do look like movie-grade CG, in which case: great. But if not, it means we started getting comfy using DLSS when we needed to reach for extra frames not because our games suddenly got better looking, but because it was a way to make the frame counter go up.

And there's a whiff of that about 5090's Multi-Frame Generation. Maybe it's the key in the door to vastly more impressive visuals. Maybe developers will treat it as a cue to raise the fidelity ceiling of their PC releases, trusting MFG to make previously unplayable framerates smooth as butter. Given the pricing, and the fact that the tech's only available on this one prohibitively expensive card, though, it seems unlikely that studios will go out of their way to cater for such a small part of their total audience. Nor is there even a guarantee that a given game will even support it – 75 titles use it at the time of writing, and games with prior Frame Gen support can be configured to use MFG via the Nvidia app. Maybe MFG support will become a matter of course. Or maybe the pace of visual progress will continue its slow current trajectory, and we'll use MFG as a way to quantify the value of our £2,000 purchase. 270fps in Cyberpunk, look! How could that 5090 possibly be a waste of money, with numbers like that? ■

Phil Iwaniuk

WHAT'S NEXT?

The RGB '**GAMER AESTHETIC**' will one day pass – what will take its place?

First they came for the tribal patterns, and I didn't speak out because my gaming mouse didn't feature a tribal pattern. Then they came for the RGB zones on headsets, and I didn't speak out because you can't see your headset while you're wearing it. Eventually, all aspects of that well-established PC gaming aesthetic as we currently know it will become outmoded, and the desk setups we see on streams, subreddits and our own sacred nooks of virtual escapism will bear little to no resemblance to it. Question is, what will take its place?

Perhaps taking a look back through history at how the current trends took root will give us a clue. The foundation of the gamer aesthetic, even more fundamental than the coloured lighting, is this one immutable truth: all hardware must be black.

OK, sometimes it can be white. Or pink. Or even beige, for a retro look. But taking a look back at the predominant trends of the last two decades, the shift from workplace-friendly neutral tones to black was crucial. It might seem an arbitrary palette swap now, looking back, but during the turn of the millennium when the shift took place, it represented an important reclamation of territory.

OFF-WHITE ON THE NIGHT

A lot of the early PC hardware that came to market in the 1960s and '70s was, in fact, black. Only when a specific piece of workplace legislature was introduced in Germany did the great beige-washing begin. It was decided that light, neutral colours would seem less intimidating to workers, and would blend nicely in with existing office equipment. Therefore, if companies like IBM wanted to sell their wares in the German domestic market, they needed to offer a beige model. The most cost-effective solution? Just make all your products beige in the first place. That's what IBM and its peers did, and soon offices and home computer rooms the world over took on the complexion of a hearing aid. So, decades later, when a market for PC hardware intended specifically for gamers emerged, there was an opportunity to distinguish that hardware from the machines that you'd find in an office: make it black.

There's no reason to think this default colour will change anytime soon, either. It's turned out to be very practical, since it hides the grime that accumulates on peripherals, ensures a uniformity between peripherals, monitors and usually PC cases too, between different manufacturers.

THE REST IS DIZZYING, MAGENTA AND BLUE HISTORY

And, crucially, it makes RGB lighting pop. And that leads us onto the other principal element of the current aesthetic. How did it come to pass that every component of a PC gaming setup should emit those intoxicating programmable lights?

LIGHT IT UP

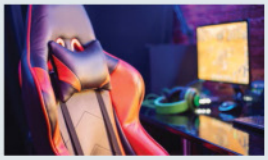
Firstly, there's a practical reason. Gaming spaces tend to be low light areas, because we like to see our screens without sunlight glare bouncing off our screens, and we like to feel immersed in our games. We've been drawing the curtains and hunkering down in near-darkness for decades, so when keyboards arrived which featured backlit keys, that served a useful purpose. You could orient your hands in the dark and find WASD in a quick glance.

Then one fateful CES in 2014, Razer and Corsair revealed new gaming keyboards which drew inspiration from the case modding scene and brought it to the PC gaming mainstream. Here were keyboards with mechanical switches and backlit keys which weren't just coloured, but programmable, with up to 16.8 million colours.

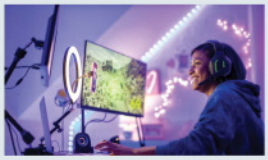
The rest is dizzying, magenta and blue history. But there's an important clue about the gaming aesthetic's future in there: RGB came from the amateur modding scene, which has a long history of drawing from the automotive modding scene. So if car tuners have already indirectly influenced what PC setups looked like, will they also shape what comes next?

PHIL IWANIUK
Freelancer and self-declared 'professional aesthete' Phil Iwaniuk begins each day with a strict regimen of weighted chin strokes, tutting for reps and high intensity Instagram training. We've stopped taking him on nights out.

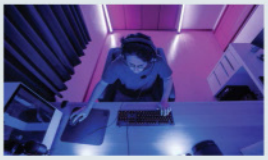
BRAVELY DEFAULT *The four essential elements of the modern PC gaming aesthetic*



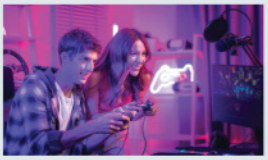
UNCOMFORTABLE CHAIR
Feels like being bent in half over a pile of sticks. That contrast colour stitching, though.



RGB STRIPS
Stuck under every surface in the room, casting more glowing light than Night City.



ALL-BLACK EVERYTHING
Other than the pink and blue lights it emits, every physical object you own shalt be purest onyx.



CUSTOM NEON SIGN
Bonus points if it's the name of your YouTube channel, and it adheres to the '__ plays' format.

If they do, it'll all come down to one word: restomod. While 2000s car culture was all about taking prosaic family hatchbacks and adding colour to them via neon underlighting and flip-flop paint jobs, today it's about restoring vintage cars in a way that respects the vehicle's original heritage while simultaneously putting a modern twist on it. Think '90s BMW M3s that retain the squared-off lines but add a carbon fibre flourish, or models that look identical to the factory version on the outside, but are flush with modern gearbox, engine and electronics.

PC gaming is old enough now to host a restomod scene of its own. Indeed, we've already seen retro builders encase high-end modern componentry within beige boxes. That aesthetic is so un-flashy, so confrontationally different to the current predominant PC gaming aesthetic, that it just might catch on. Given that we're already seeing wood panelling crop up on cases from Fractal and Corsair, mimicking the look of 1980s stereo equipment, pseudo-vintage might soon be the new black. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: How did we get here, and what will replace it?

BELOW: Once it was enough for gaming PCs to just not be beige. Our tastes have developed since then.

THE BUILD

4K Gaming Dominance

By Zak Storey

TOTAL COST £4,339

1 GRAPHICS CARD

GeForce RTX 5090

Nvidia **£1,939**

Nvidia's ultimate flagship has finally arrived, and it's a monster. It might be on the same manufacturing process as its predecessor, but the GPU itself is 23% larger than the RTX 4090. The sheer volume of CUDA, Tensor, and ray tracing cores this thing has is just staggering.

In my own testing, across multiple titles, average framerates sat comfortably above the 140fps mark throughout.

Without a doubt, right now, this is the best graphics card on the planet; there's no question. At least if you can find one in stock.

2 CASE

H9 Elite

NZXT **£190**

That graphics card demands attention, and there's no better case than the H9 Elite for that.

3 MOTHERBOARD

ROG Strix X870E-E Gaming WiFi

Asus **£440**

The X870E-E is impressive, with phenomenal connectivity and more than enough I/O.

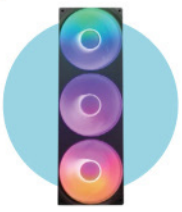
4 PROCESSOR

Ryzen 9 9950X

AMD **£564**

A CPU that matches that RTX 5090's vigour. With 32 threads and a 5.7GHz clock speed, the 9950X has no equal.

9 FANS

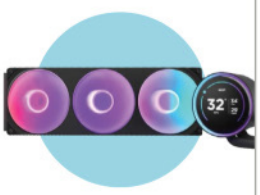


F360 RGB Core

NZXT **£50**

Say goodbye to awkward cables and connectors; NZXT's strapped three of them together in a frame.

8 COOLER



Kraken Elite 360 RGB

NZXT **£272**

With a beautiful OLED display, no cables visible and an included frame RGB core fan, this will be more than enough.

7 POWER SUPPLY

C1500

NZXT **£240**

Nvidia recommends a minimum of a 1000 W PSU with the 5090; I like to add a bit more headroom than that.

6 SSD

T705 1 TB + T500 4 TB

Crucial **£398**

I've gone for the T705 PCIe 5.0 drive for the OS and a 4 TB T500 for all of the games you could ever want to download.

5 MEMORY

Dominator Titanium DDR5-7600 48 GB

Corsair **£246**

Overkill for our AMD chip and gaming in general? Yes, but this is no ordinary machine.

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget

KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank

TOTAL
£1,017

MOTHERBOARD		**B660M Pro RS** ASRock **£112** This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		**Core i5 13400F** Intel **£170** With ten cores, six of them the Performance kind, this Raptor Lake Core i5 is fantastic value and a great all-rounder.
GRAPHICS CARD		**Radeon RX 7600** AMD **£250** AMD delivers what we need for 1080p gaming at a solid price. AMD claims it'll do over 350fps in *Rocket League*, which is a lot.
COOLER		**Laminar RM1 (included with CPU)** Intel **Free** There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		**T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB** Teamgroup **£36** 8 GB of RAM is simply not enough these days, but 16 GB of speedy DDR4 is much more like it.
POWER SUPPLY		**RM650 80 Plus** Corsair **£80** A great power supply is a must, and Corsair builds some reliable workhorses. This one's a good balance of price and power.
SSD		**SN770 1 TB** Western Digital **£60** It's time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive, even for a budget PC. You'll appreciate the extra speed and fast boot times.
CASE		**Zauron** Aerocool **£32** This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		**Mobiuz EX240** BenQ **£132** This BenQ is proof you can buy a genuinely excellent 24in 1080p gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays.
KEYBOARD		**KM250 RGB** G.Skill **£55** It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: a hot-swappable USB mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		**G305 Lightspeed** Logitech **£30** Even on a budget you can still grab a fantastic, ultra-rapid wireless squeaker like this one here.
HEADSET		**HS55 Stereo** Corsair **£50** Corsair's budget wired cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.
MOUSE PAD		**MM100** Corsair **£10** A simple black rectangle that can make a world of difference over no-name models, and it's almost as cheap, too.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games

TOTAL
£1,567

MOTHERBOARD		**TUF Gaming B650-E** Asus **£170** A reliable motherboard with plenty of frills, including Wi-Fi 6E, 2.5Gb Ethernet, PCIe 5.0 for the SSD and USB-C on the back.
PROCESSOR		**Ryzen 7 7700X** AMD **£244** For the longevity offered by the AM5 socket, we're going for AMD's excellent eight-core Ryzen 7.
GRAPHICS CARD		**RX 7700 XT** AMD **£400** If you can spare the extra cash, the RX 7800 XT is a tantalising upgrade. Nevertheless, we'll opt for AMD's cheaper card here.
COOLER		**Peerless Assassin 120 SE** Thermaltake **£35** It's a big beast, but it brings cooling performance to the table that's undeniably impressive.
MEMORY		**Viper Venom DDR5-5600 16 GB** Patriot **£59** It might not have fancy RGB lighting, but this Patriot RAM certainly has the speed you need for less.
POWER SUPPLY		**Pure Power 12 M 750W** Be Quiet! **£104** This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with PCIe 5.0 connectivity. At 750W, there's room for a GPU upgrade too.
SSD		**NM790 1TB** Lexar **£70** The Lexar proves you can, sometimes, have it all: blazing speeds, cool operation and a great price.
CASE		**H7** NZXT **£100** It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		**PXC277 Advanced** Pixio **£210** The price of this Pixio, considering the 1440p resolution and 165 Hz refresh rate, is quite something.
KEYBOARD		**KM250 RGB** GO.Skill **£55** You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		**DeathAdder V2** Razer **£40** This Razer mouse is a superb companion for competitive gaming without breaking the bank.
HEADSET		**Cloud Alpha** HyperX **£60** We're still not over the awesome audio quality and excellent comfort of the HyperX Cloud Alpha.
MOUSE PAD		**G440** Logitech **£20** This low-friction hard-top mouse pad with minimal branding offers the smoothest of glides for a reasonable price.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

TOTAL
£6,225

MOTHERBOARD

MEG X670E Ace
MSI **£700**
There are cheaper X670 boards than this, but we're going extreme and this is one of the most fully featured around.

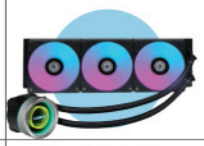
PROCESSOR

Ryzen 7 9800X3D
AMD **£450**
The upcoming Zen 5 top-end X3D models will have more cores, but for gaming this is the bee's knees.

GRAPHICS CARD

GeForce RTX 4090
Nvidia **£2,000**
The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. As the new cards loom, however, it's becoming harder to find for a good price.

COOLER



Galahad II Trinity 360
Lian Li **£134**
Lian Li's Galahad is all about pure liquid cooling performance and it delivers this flawlessly.

MEMORY

Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB)
G.Skill **£115**
This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.

POWER SUPPLY

Prime TX-1000
Seasonic **£340**
An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.

BOOT DRIVE

NM790 4 TB
Lexar **£270**
With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.

MOUSE PAD

Firefly V2 Pro
Razer **£100**
Do you need an RGB mouse mat? If it makes you feel any better it's excellent for flick shots.

CASE

5000D
Corsair **£139**
We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.

DISPLAY

ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM
Asus **£1,349**
You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.

KEYBOARD

ROG Strix Scope II 96 Wireless
Asus **£190**
We're keyboard snobs, and we can say with confidence that this full-sized Asus board is about as good as it gets.

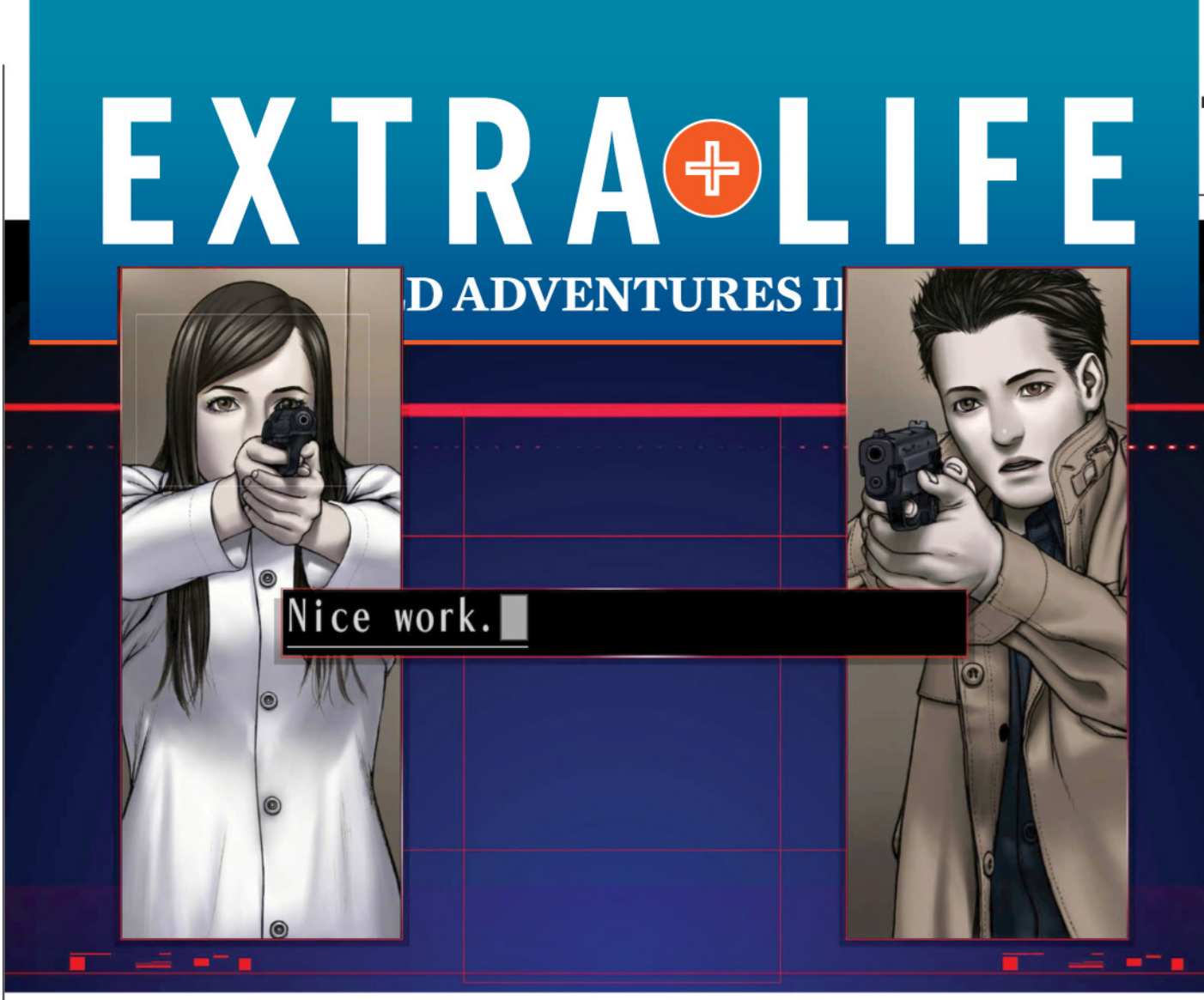
MOUSE

DeathAdder V3 Pro
Razer **£118**
This is the best gaming mouse in our opinion, made better by an incredibly lightweight frame.

HEADSET

Maxwell
Audeze **£320**
Planar magnetic drivers make this headset pure heaven for audio fans. And everyone else, to be honest.

EXTRA LIFE



"It totally works for the red-string-corkboard I call a brain"

THE SILVER CASE sees me well on my way to reading more in 2025

Now, I know what you're thinking, "A visual novel awarded a score of only 50%? Oof." But I knew I was onto a winner from the very first word. I wasn't the only one, either; my mum often falls asleep when I'm showing her a new game, but for Grasshopper Manufacture's debut thriller, she stayed awake.

Debuting on the original PlayStation as a Japan-exclusive in 1999, *The Silver Case* was remastered, re-released, and finally localised for English-speaking PC Gamers back in 2016. To be fair to the contemporaneous review, it has definitely not aged gracefully in a number of ways. The clunky movement is bad enough, but exploration also requires you to mode shift before you can interact with anything; it takes far too many button presses to do something as straightforward as read a document or answer a ringing phone.

Then, there's also the '90s-flavoured sexism. To elaborate, much of the game is concerned with the Heinous Crimes Unit, a decidedly male-dominated department tasked with eradicating "transmissible crimes". Their sole female member, Chizuru Hachisuka, happens to be the nepo baby daughter of the mayor, but is mercifully no shrinking violet. In one early case with a mounting body count, male members of the department exchange stomach-turning theories about 'women's ideal man' and Chizuru calls it out for what it is. Watching this unfold, my mum quipped, "It's just as well she said something – all the other women in this story are dead."

When characters start spouting nonsense about women, it seldom goes unchallenged within the text, often proving to be downright exposing about whoever started chatting the proverbial. It's no less skin crawling to encounter in 2025, but it's deployed with purpose, making for both messy bastards I

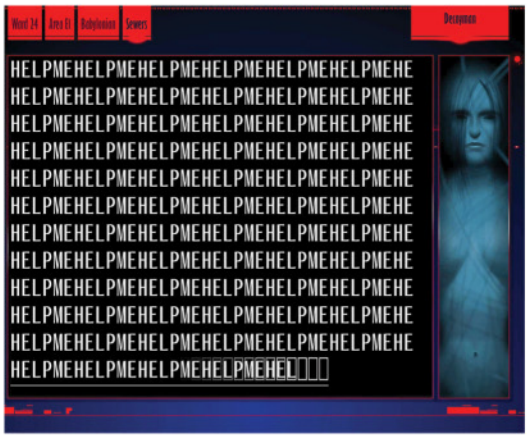
JESS KINGHORN

THIS MONTH
Obsessed over even more lunar leitmotifs in The Silver Case.

ALSO PLAYED
Infinity Nikki, Final Fantasy XIV Online

TOP: Killer style and confronting writing makes this a visual novel you won't want to tear your eyes away from.

MUCH OF THE GAME IS CONCERNED WITH THE HEINOUS CRIMES UNIT



can't get enough of and confronting writing best quickly devoured.

MURDERERS

Speaking of writing, the many unspooling threads of the two interlinked storylines – Transmission and Placebo – can be a lot to keep up with. But it totally works for the red-string-corkboard I call a brain.

Just take the prologue where your silent protagonist participates in a mission to capture a violent criminal. When the elusive target makes a grand reappearance, acting like a man possessed under the light of the moon, I began to wonder whether the chapter title refers to moonstruck madness or something more spiritual.

Frequently creepy, and at turns cerebral, it's worth digging to the bottom of the mystery through your own seance. But, if you're still itching for one more reason, here it is: while I was intrigued from the first word, two more from a certain crotchety character endeared me fully. Though you can offer up your own name for the protagonist of the Transmission storyline, HCU copper Tetsugoro Kusabi soon mints you with a new title: Big Dick. Did I already mention I thought it was a good idea to play this with my Mum? ■

Cloud should be very worried.

"Tifa and Aerith are double trouble"

Getting laughed at in FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH

ROBERT JONES

THIS MONTH
Learned to hate Queen's Blood

ALSO PLAYED
Baldur's Gate III, Remember Me

Being stuck between two beautiful women is not something that most people would find troublesome. However, when there's previous and potential romantic baggage circling, too, things become a little bit more complicated. You see, there's undoubted chemistry between hero of the hour, Cloud Strife, and Aerith Gainsborough, the frequently flirtatious flower seller turned magic-wielding resistance fighter. They've been good friends, fought side-by-side against the Shinra Electric Power Company, and have shared plenty of emotional moments during their escape from Midgar to here, the expansive wild countryside that encircles around the great city.

So Cloud and Aerith make sense. There have been awkward moments of silence, gazes that rested on each other for slightly too long, as well as some good old emotional confusion thrown in to boot. However, there's no escaping Cloud and Tifa's backstory in *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, as well as the fact that *Rebirth*, right from the start, dials up their relationship with ferocity. Cloud is suffering from memory loss and memory confusion with his fellow fighter, Zack Fair, due to Mako poisoning and, while he still knows who Tifa is, has forgotten their previous bond, something that Tifa is painfully aware of. So, when Cloud is invited by Aerith to climb a tower with her on what she later refers to as a 'date' in front of Tifa, Cloud finds himself in a sticky romantic entanglement of the calibre that Bertie Wooster often experiences.

FIGURE OF FUN

However, while Tifa and Aerith may be competitors in love, they are lock-step when it comes around to their joy of teasing Cloud. Combined in the pursuit of giggling at Cloud, Tifa and Aerith are double trouble. For example, as we stand here at Bill's chocobo ranch, attempting to strike a deal for mounts to aid us on our pursuit of Sephiroth, a man who is overcompensating for something with the length of his daikatana, the two women are likening Cloud to Pico the chocobo, with his yellow hair compared to that of the bird's feathers. Maybe there are worse things than being in love after all. ■

"It's brilliantly effective, but it succeeds by adding complexity"

A new genre works its way back to an old one in HALLS OF TORMENT

One of the most surprising success stories of the last few years in PC gaming has been the rise of both *Vampire Survivors* and its genre of copycats. So nascent we don't even have a proper name for it yet – survivors-likes? Bullet heaven? Auto-shooters?

Whatever you call them, they're a phenomenon. Because they don't call for complex animation or level design, thrive on repetition, and can be built out of very simple assets or even ones already created for another project, they're relatively quick and easy to make. That's led to an explosion of different games, each rapidly evolving the genre. The funny thing is, some of the best and boldest examples of that iteration are really just working backwards.

Halls of Torment is my latest obsession. It combines the core formula of *Vampire Survivors* with the look and feel of the original *Diablo*. Its retro, isometric graphics and dark fantasy art style give it a wonderful sense of atmosphere, and character-building and loot mechanics similarly inspired by Blizzard's classic add depth and strategy to the experience. It's a common thread – games like *Death Must Die* and *Karate Survivors* build some of the complexity of action-RPGs into the genre, creating experiences with greater depth.

ROBIN VALENTINE

THIS MONTH
Thought about genre.

ALSO PLAYED
Dungeon Clawler, Battle Chasers: Nightwar

The irony, though, is that what *Vampire Survivors* was in the first place was a distillation of the experience of a *Diablo*-like RPG. It was designed to evoke that feeling of building in power, gaining new abilities and spells, and taking on hundreds of enemies at a time with flashy explosion, but with only a few choices and 30 minutes of your time, instead of 100 hours of play.

AN EXPLOSION OF DIFFERENT GAMES, EACH RAPIDLY EVOLVING THE GENRE

SHOTS NOT MOJITOS

As it grows and builds new layers, the genre looks back to that original inspiration, and simply grabs more from it. In *Halls of Torment*'s case, that means recreating the look of an action-RPG, the classes, the skill trees, the NPCs, and more.

It's brilliantly effective, but it succeeds by adding complexity back into a formula that was designed to strip it all away. How far along this path can the genre go before it has simply reverse-engineered its way back to full action-RPGs? It's like figuring out that instead of making mojitos you can get just as hammered drinking shots of pure white rum, but then wondering if it might be nicer if you added a bit of soda water, some lime, maybe a bit of mint...

But if *Halls of Torment* is great regardless, then what point am I making? I suppose just that the evolution of game genres can be a strange and winding one, where sometimes retracing your steps is the same as moving forwards. ■

I'll tell you one thing *Diablo* never had: a class that's just a guy with a flamethrower.

BELOW: There's a dizzying array of classes, each with its own distinct abilities, progression, and quests.

Not quite the Canyon of the Crescent Moon.

"Indy's shadow provides all the information you need"

INDIANA JONES AND THE GREAT CIRCLE offers fore- and rear-shadowing

A priest opens a door and peers into the darkness. "Indy, is that you?" Now, this is a very good question, because despite appearances it's not Indy, it's someone wearing Indy like a suit.

Throughout *Indiana Jones and the Great Circle*, MachineGames goes to great lengths to remind you of the identity of the character you're puppeteering. This can be difficult in a first-person game, which doesn't support the same kind of identification with a character that a third-person view offers.

Playing as a known, named character is a different experience to embodying a character you've created yourself, there's less self-insertion, and the desire to play in a style that matches what you know of the personality you're inhabiting is stronger. Indy has a recognisable silhouette, one that's been part of popular culture since 1981. The whip coiling outward from his waist, the bulge of the handgun in its holster and the hat. That a simple high-crowned fedora can become so firmly associated with a character is a remarkable thing, and in *Great Circle* Indy's hat-shadow provides all the information you need about who you're playing as.

IAN EVENDEN

THIS MONTH
Stood with his back to the moon over and over again

ALSO PLAYED
Critter Cafe, Cyberpunk 2077

LET THERE BE LIGHT

Shadows have to come from somewhere, of course, and the lighting placement in *Great Circle* is perfectly poised to create them. There are spotlights arranged all around the place, even in the Vatican where you might expect more in the way of candles or just a mysterious glow. The moon, which hangs full and bright over Italy, always seems to be behind you when you peer down a dark passageway.

THE MOON ALWAYS SEEMS TO BE BEHIND YOU WHEN YOU PEER DOWN A PASSAGEWAY

It's a trick games have used before. In *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay*, Vin Diesel's much less distinctive bald head loomed over the goons whose faces he was punching, and *Doom 3* got in on the act with Carmack's stencil shadowing such a novelty back then that players spent time at the beginning just playing with them, jogging back and forth to see the effect on a nearby wall. Shadows add so much to a game, and one that handles them well will age more gracefully than one that doesn't.

Again, though, Doomguy doesn't wear a hat, or have horns, or do anything to make his silhouette stand out. Spielberg did MachineGames such a favour in 1981, and the studio's spotlight-placement team and moonlight direction specialists have leapt upon the opportunity. ■

HUNT: SHOWDOWN 1896

I had doubts, but Post Malone's Murder Circus is Crytek's best seasonal event yet. *By Morgan Park*

While my coworkers spent their spring breaks tackling their backlog of 2024 games, I ignored my pile and got back into *Hunt: Showdown 1896* in a big way. I'd barely touched the extraction shooter since its big *1896* update thanks to some unfortunate performance bugs, but those were cleared up in time for *Hunt*'s biggest event ever: Post Malone's Murder Circus.

Yea, it's a weird one. The event centres around Grammy-nominated recording artist Post Malone, who also happens to be a hardcore *Hunt: Showdown* fan with over 400 hours logged. This is the first time Crytek has ventured into the world of real-world celebrity crossovers, and while I was worried it'd be an ugly fit for an FPS set in the 1800s, I'm surprised to report it actually works. If this were *Fortnite*, Post Malone would've simply been dropped into the game as himself, but in *Hunt* he's playing a character: The Deposed King, the supernatural ringmaster of a cursed circus of freaks. In full cowboy getup with serpent adornments and his recognisable tattoos, Malone honestly fits right into the *Hunt* world.

But the Deposed King is just a battle pass accessory. The real star is the ritual Murder Circus, a new point of interest added to all three currently available maps. This is another *Hunt* first – adding what's essentially an entirely new compound that will only exist for a few months.

The circus tent is a small arena with high walls that block vision, but let any bullet pass straight through. Guarding the central tent is Ursa Mortis, a three-headed bear monster that functions like a miniboss, chasing hunters in and around the tent while inflicting intense bleeding with its screams.

I sorely underestimated the beast when I first fought it. Not only is it faster than a Meathead, but it'll chase you farther too. I learned that the hard way when I emptied a magazine of compact ammo into its back and then pulled the usual *Hunt* move of running outside where boss can't chase. Except Ursa Mortis does not respect boundaries: it chased me outside the tent while I reloaded and gave my guts a suntan.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE February 22, 2018	**DEVELOPER** Crytek
PUBLISHER Crytek	**LINK** huntshowdown.com

NEW TOYS

What's the point of taking Ursa Mortis on? The monster doesn't award a bounty token like a traditional *Hunt* boss, but it is guarding the most ridiculous weapon Crytek has ever cooked up: the Shredder, a mechanical sawblade launcher whose spinning projectiles can ricochet off walls – essentially a power weapon pickup that instantly makes you the biggest threat on the map. The catch is you have to cash in a full stack of Pledge Marks to pick it up, which usually requires winning one or two matches with your hunter ahead of time.

The Shredder is a fascinating experiment for *Hunt*. It's really fun to mess with – creative and outlandish, and capable of unmaking bosses in seconds or rending through multiple hunters at once. Its scarcity means that extracting with one is almost as special as escaping with a full set of bounties, even though the Shredder itself can't be sold for Hunt Dollars. It's an entirely limited-time weapon that's going away when the Murder Circus skips town in a few months, which is kind of a bummer, but at least you can keep any hunters already holding Shredders around. By taking it away, Crytek is also creating a new ultra-rare trophy I can one day lose to a random headshot.

GUARDING THE CENTRAL TENT IS A THREE-HEADED BEAR MONSTER

Not all of the Murder Circus' new gear is temporary. There's also the Chu Ko Nu, a historical repeating crossbow of Chinese origin that can send ten bolts downrange in as many seconds. The description alone had me afraid Crytek had gone off the deep end and added a crossbow so good that it invalidates all silenced guns, but the Chu Ko Nu has some major downsides that make are fun to work around – you can't ADS with it, for one, and you can only reliably hit stuff within 10-20 meters. It's fantastic for clearing out AI monsters, but situational in PvP.

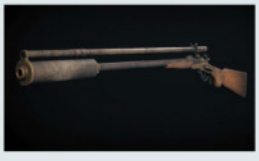
Post Malone's Murder Circus shows the power of a really a good update. Even as my FPS moods tended toward casual, respawn-friendly shooters last year, *Hunt: Showdown* is still so good that it can reel me back in for dozens of hours. ■

GEAR UP

Weapons of Post Malone's Murder Circus

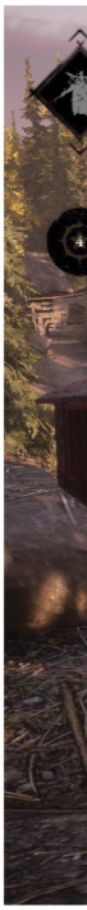
KRAG SILENCER
The silenced variant of one of the rifles in Hunt, which just so happens to be Malone's favourite.

CHU KO NU
A fully-automatic crossbow capable of one-shotting most AI enemies to the chest.



SNIPER SILENCER
Hunt's newest sniper rifle, special for its extra-long scope, blinding speed, and relatively cheap price.

SHREDDER
A power weapon that flings ricocheting sawblades around corners and through hunters.



The Deposed King himself, surprisingly befitting for a *Hunt: Showdown* glowup.

FAR LEFT: Sometimes a showdown is settled with a fistfight.

LEFT: The Shredder's blades are quiet, cause bleeding, and can be swapped for explosive frag blades.

BELOW: When you roll up on the murder circus, it's best to assume players have already been there.

THE BURTON EQUATION

Battle Combine across the 20th century in this Half-Life 2 mod. *By Christopher Livingston*

Sure, Gordon Freeman taking on the Combine in City 17 is pretty cool. But what about a hard-boiled private detective taking on the Combine in 1920s Chicago? Throw in some Tommy guns, trenchcoats, and a gritty voiceover, and you've got *The Burton Equation*, a mod that turns *Half-Life 2* into a noir shooter.

Don't worry, it's not all gunning-down gangsters: there's plenty of sci-fi in the mod as well. Did I mention there's time travel? There's time travel. You may start out in gangland Chicago, but you won't stay there for long. You can sit this fight out, Dr Freeman: Zachary Burton is on the case.

In the world of *The Burton Equation*, the Combine aren't quite the extradimensional alien invaders we're used to. They're more like an organised crime gang, stalking the city with Tommy guns, pistols, and clubs, wearing fedoras and trenchcoats. This is Chicago in the 1920s, the time of prohibition, corruption, and lawlessness that allowed bodyguard and bootlegger Al Capone to become the de facto mayor of the city. Only in this mod, the top gangster is a wiseguy named Fabreen, head of the Metro-Gang.

The only good cop left in the city is Zachary Burton. He's disgusted by the widespread corruption, and after being prodded by a mysterious woman to get off his keister and do something about it, he goes out to,

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Nov 16, 2004

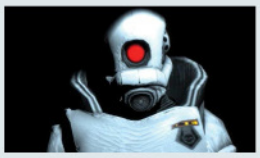
DEVELOPER
Valve

PUBLISHER
Valve

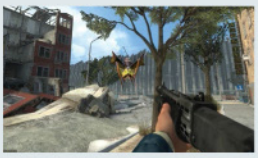
LINK
half-life.com

FRIENDLY FIRE

Four great mods that give you more Half-Life

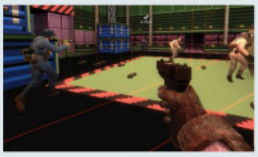


ENTROPY: ZERO 2
Play as a Combine soldier instead of as Gordon Freeman in the best *Half-Life 2* campaign.



SWELTER
Years before Freeman arrives in City 17, lead an uprising against the aliens in Central Asia.

MINERVA
Wearing a stolen HEV suit, infiltrate a remote island under Combine control.



JABRONI BRAWL: EPISODE 3
It's a massive collection of multiplayer maps and modes you'll never get tired of.

FAR LEFT: Get noir in City 17.

ABOVE: Visit the neon-soaked Miami of the 1980s.

well, do something about it. After grabbing his fedora and revolver, he settles on a plan: he just starts shooting every single dang Combine thug in the city. Look, *Half-Life 2* is a shooter, not a point-and-click adventure, unless you consider pointing a gun and clicking the fire button as a 'point-and-click'.

GUYS AND SHINE

I admit, I was a little disappointed when I discovered there weren't really any investigational aspects of *The Burton Equation* (apart from a few environmental puzzles), but it's still great fun to be doing battle with the Combine again, especially in a black-and-white noir version of Chicago. Plus, I've got a few tricks up my trenchcoat's sleeve that Gordon Freeman couldn't pack into his HEV suit. I don't have a crowbar and I don't need one because I can punch, and more enjoyably, I can kick. If a Metro Cop runs up with his club, I can drop him with a few punches. Crates and even some doors (ones marked with an enormous boot print) can be kicked into splinters.

And while there's only a few different weapons in the Chicago section of the mod, they're great fun to unload into Combine cops. My pistol is so powerful it'll drop a cop in one shot, the automatic I grab off a dead guy takes a few rounds (unless they're headshots), but the real joy is in the staccato bursts of fire from the drum-fed Thompson submachine gun, or Tommy gun. Slinking through the darkened alleyways in the rain, stepping dramatically into the headlights of a parked Model T, and gunning down the Metro-Gang, well, that's a delight Gordon Freeman will never know.

After fighting my way through the labyrinthine city, I corner mob boss Fabreen in one of his warehouses – but he's no slouch in the combat department. While mocking me and sending scores of his goons my way, he finally reveals himself to be a nimble and durable opponent, and reminding me that this is science fiction and not a period piece, he slithers away by jumping to another time period. Well, fine. If I have to travel to 1940s Germany to catch up with Fabreen, I'm gonna do it. Any good detective would do the same.

TIME UNRAVELER

No longer black and white, the world now becomes sepia-toned as I battle my through more Combine who are now dressed as Nazi soldiers, meaning shooting them is even more enjoyable. I fight my way through the trenches, grabbing some updated weapons and facing some higher-tech threats, like several Hunters (mini-Striders) who first appeared in the *Half-Life 2* episodes. Looks like Fabreen has been updating his arsenal, the scoundrel.

After the World War II levels, Fabreen evades justice again, this time leaping another four decades into the future, and I, Zachary Burton follow him, this time to the neon-drenched, coke-fuelled city of Miami, Florida, in the 1980s. I'll say this for Fabreen, he sure has a nose for picking the right place to be an evil overlord. Eventually I even wind up

I CORNER MOB BOSS FABREEN IN ONE OF HIS WAREHOUSES

chasing him through the future, in Freeman's own time and the proper war against the Combine.

PUZZLES TO SOLVE

Along the way there are a few puzzles to solve: find a fuse and carry it to a power box to restore electricity, for instance, or collect a security key to open a sealed door. There are also occasionally power-ups to find, like a hovering fedora that gives me maximum health or a spinning revolver that buffs me to double-damage for a short period of time, encouraging me to make a mad dash around the city looking for foes instead of my usual slow and careful slinking through the streets. And while there's no real hard boiled mystery to solve in this noir caper, there are enjoyable interludes painted like comic book panels as Burton delivers his gritty inner monologue on the situation at hand.

The Burton Equation is a fun and breezy action mod, and if you haven't fought the Combine in a while, this is a fun way to make their acquaintance again. While it requires *Half-Life 2* to play, *The Burton Equation* has its own page on Steam. ■

GET STARTED IN

KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE 2

Audentes fortuna iuvat! *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Normal

TIME
15 hours

VITAL LINKS

How to get a free horse:
shorturl.at/U7ZGB

Treasure map solutions:
shorturl.at/HB58v

How to make money:
shorturl.at/SoF0j

MAKE IT SCHNAPPY

1 Saving your game requires either an owned bed or Saviour Schnapps. You'll need at least one Belladonna and one Nettle to make the weakest version, so I recommend buying lots of these from Troskowitz apothecary or Aranka at the Nomad Camp, then brewing it en masse.

GOOD GRUB

2 Keeping yourself fed and rested during your travels is vital. You can get free food from enemies, steal it from their camps, or eat at the cooking pot in locations where you own a bed. Sleeping is a little trickier – you can rent a room, rest at camps, or have a nap in a bed.

TOP PICK

3 You can get your first lockpick from Bara the Beggar once you're freed from the stocks in Troskowitz. After that you can purchase them from traders and have a chance to get them by knocking down bird nests – simply press C to crouch and G to throw a stone.

CRIME PAYS

4 You can sell items you've nicked to Fence Whitebeard at the Nomad Camp, or Miller Kreyzl at Lower Semine Mill. If you wait long enough the little red hand icon – indicating stolen goods – will also disappear, letting you sell them at a regular trader.

HORSING AROUND

5 You can even steal and sell horses at the Nomad Camp, though there's an easier way to get one at the start of the game. If you head to Semine, to the south-west of Troskowitz, you'll find a horse trader at the castle.

DOG OF WAR

6 You can get some initial combat tips from Master Tomcat at the Nomad Camp, but it's best to avoid fighting groups. If you have to, use the terrain to funnel and fight foes one by one. Also complete the quest to find Mutt, since your pooch is a big help.

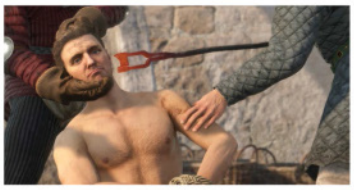
BATHTIME

7 After a tussle or two, you'll realise that your garments are caked in various excreta. Washing in a vat of water will get most of it off, but your best bet is visiting a bathhouse, since staying clean is important for passing speech checks and giving a good impression.

KNOW YOUR KNIGHT *Load up Henry with the very best kit*

BRAIN VS BRAWN

8 If you don't want to let your sword do the talking and want to try actual talking instead, make sure to study every skill book that you can. While some of these will educate you in combat, others like Master's Studies, will boost your Scholarship and make you smarter.



GETTING A REP

9 As you help villagers in need, accomplish heroic deeds, and just act like a good guy, your reputation in towns will improve. This leads to friendlier guards and townsfolk, allows you to stay at the inn, and most importantly, you'll be able to sell stuff for more money.

EASY SALE

10 Speaking of making money, one of the best ways is to sell weapons and armour from enemies you've defeated. Keep the best items for yourself, of course, but helmets, gauntlets, pauldrons and leg armour are worth a truckload of Groschen.

BURIED TREASURE

11 Another way to earn some extra cash is to complete treasure maps. You'll sometimes find these in camps. The only thing worth noting is that though 'Treasure Map – Third' and 'Treasure Map – Fourth' can be acquired in the first region, their treasures are in the second.

HAVE A BREW

12 Besides sleeping, potions are the only way to replenish health. You can either use Saviour Schnapps or make a Marigold Decoction instead. Potions can also rid you of a hangover, make you better at sneaking, or even improve your lockpicking.

SEARCHING FOR TRUE FREEDOM AND HIGH FASHION IN

DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2 PART 2

Mister Fibula may be dead, but he's never looked better. *By James Nouch*

I'm beginning to think that prison breaks aren't all they're cracked up to be. The esteemed Mister Fibula and his retinue of haughty hangers-on have endured brutal guards, murderous inmates, and a painfully limited selection of couture. Undaunted, they have fought, bargained, and window-climbed their way out of the infamous Fort Joy, only to remember that – oh yeah – they're on an island. So, while we're no longer trapped by imposing walls and capricious guards, our new jailer goes by the name of tedious geographical reality.

But it's not all bad. As an ancient corpse with only a tenuous grasp on what constitutes normal, mortal behaviour, Mister Fibula should be safer in these sparsely occupied swamps than he ever was in the crowded confines of Fort Joy. The fleshy, breathing inhabitants of Rivellon are almost universally hostile to the undead, and Fibs is yet to reliably control his urge to ask strange questions like, "Do you really think lips are necessary?" Best to stick to the swamps for the time being, I think.

As secluded as our post-breakout existence may be, a near-endless swirl of rumour and intrigue seems to find its way to us. There's hearsay of dissident Magisters and courageous rebel factions helping prisoners to break free of their shackles. There's whispers of hidden vaults and underground fighting arenas. And then there are the tales of the cruel old king – Braccus Rex – and the bygone age in which this island served as his stronghold. But none of these rumours refer directly to troves of chiffon, chenille and satin, so Mister Fibula utterly ignores them.

And so we trudge on, battling swampish mages, skittering voidlings and shambling swashbucklers as we go. While it's refreshing to be able to lay aside any fears that Mister Fibula will either a) immediately offend and alienate every NPC he meets or b) say something that irrefutably announces his status as an unholy necromantic creation, I can't help but notice that we aren't really making progress on any of our longer-term goals. So long as we remain in this unpopulated wilderness, we're unlikely to satisfy either of Fibs' most urgent desires (the first being escape, and the second being to find and purchase a luxurious yet secluded home and furnish it in a manner I'd describe as Frasier Crane-adjacent).

So, newly resolute, Mister Fibula and his companions – the noble Red Prince, the murderous Sebille, and fellow undead abomination Fane – set out in search of mortal company. Within minutes, we find it, stumbling into the base of operations for an entire resistance movement pushing back against the tyranny of the Magisters. They're called the Seekers, and their longstanding order is now dedicated to protecting Sourcerers from persecution and imprisonment. They're bound to be friendly, right?

I grab my phone and dutifully open the randomised timer app. In our last instalment, you see, I used this timer to determine when and where Mister Fibula would inadvertently reveal himself as undead. By setting the alarm to sound at some random time between 0 and 90 minutes from now, I can simulate Fibs' limited and unpredictable ability to pass as mortal. The ticking clock – and my own lingering memories of the humiliating beatdown our heroes endured last time – adds a note of anxiety to the otherwise warm welcome we receive. I take a deep breath as Fibs prepares to exchange totally normal hellos with throngs of regular, breathing humans. It'll be fine, I think. It'll be fine.

THE DO-GOODER SEEKERS ALL TURN AROUND AND BEAT THE SHIT OUT OF HIM

WORKING STIFF

Do I need to explain what happens next? The alarm goes off after barely a minute, I remove Mister Fibula's hood to expose his big bony head, and the plucky do-gooder Seekers all turn around and beat the shit out of him.

I'd be lying if I said that getting repeatedly stomped by narrow-minded NPCs wasn't beginning to wear a little. After all, what has Mister Fibula done to deserve all this hostility? Sure, his unliving state may be an affront to the natural order, but pobody's nerfect. To underline the pathos and drama of this moment, I gather the party on a sandy beach and have them look out mournfully across the tempestuous sea that traps them on this bitter island.

And that's when I see it. A narrow tower on a secluded corner of shore. The roof is gone, perhaps shorn off by lightning strike long ago, leaving the interior exposed. Closer inspection reveals that the structure lacks any kind of door, but that's no obstacle – Mister Fibula casts Teleportation, and Sebille disappears in a puff of magicky smoke before reappearing directly above the tower. A second later, gravity reasserts its command of the situation and Sebille tumbles into the tower in a heap.

What treasures await in this hard-to-reach spot? At first glance, nothing more than a pile of corpses,

THE RULES

1. The concerns of regular, living people are confusing and quaint to you.

2. The finer things. You've had centuries to cultivate a taste for refinement and comfort.

3. You must periodically unequip your helm and reveal yourself as undead.

but closer inspection reveals a pair of fetching boots. Now this is an intriguing development. To make matters even more tantalising, the footwear seems to have once belonged to the fearsome Braccus Rex. True to his bastard-ish reputation, Braccus' boots will curse their wearer, rendering them unable to move unless all five items in the armour set are equipped at once. The promise of a co-ordinated outfit would surely pique Mister Fibula's interest, but the promise of a co-ordinated outfit that was made for and worn by a king? Fibs resolves that he will not set foot on a boat out of here until he is bedecked in his kingly ensemble.

TO DIE FOR

I rack my brain to think of any leads we might have already encountered, and recall a journal we found hours earlier on the body of a fallen adventurer. The scrawled fragment spoke of a secret vault in which Braccus Rex hid away powerful weapons. Might the old king's armour count among these treasures? Mister Fibula's levels of excitement and intrigue surge to new heights when we reach the location described and discover a cave entrance concealed by illusion magic. This must be the place.

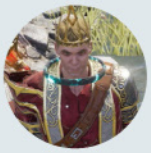
Sadly, adventuring inside brings us face-to-bony-face with the vault's guardian: the odious Trompdoy. He too may be undead, but otherwise he's everything Mister Fibula is not, peppering his conversation with crass innuendo and undignified taunts. In an act of rare good sense, Fibs tries to exit the conversation, but Trompdoy is a master illusionist and our exploration of the vault is constantly interrupted by his magical doppelgängers.

Eventually, we overcome traps and obstacles and simmering irritation to reach the treasure trove at the heart of the vault, where piles of gleaming gold coinage surround alluring treasure chests. But before Fibs and the gang can indulge in some celebratory rummaging, Trompdoy appears. He explains that Braccus Rex cursed him to guard this place for all eternity, that he's desperate to be free of his torment, and that his very soul resides in a nearby jar. If we'd only break it, he could finally pass on and find some measure of peace. Mister Fibula pockets the jar intact (reasoning that it might one day make a nice table centrepiece) and turns his back on the conversation.

I WOULDN'T BE CAUGHT DEAD IN THAT

Mister Fibula rates the fashion choices of Rivellon's denizens

SAMADEL
The bold contrast between polished brass and rich garnet fabrics has this Seeker warrior looking très chic on the battlefield.
B+



BISHOP ALEXANDER
No one can argue with the quality of that stitching, but someone should tell Alex there is such a thing as overdoing it.
C-

GARETH
Simple, timeless elegance. He does lose points for being named Gareth in a game with dragons and magic and stuff, though.
B-

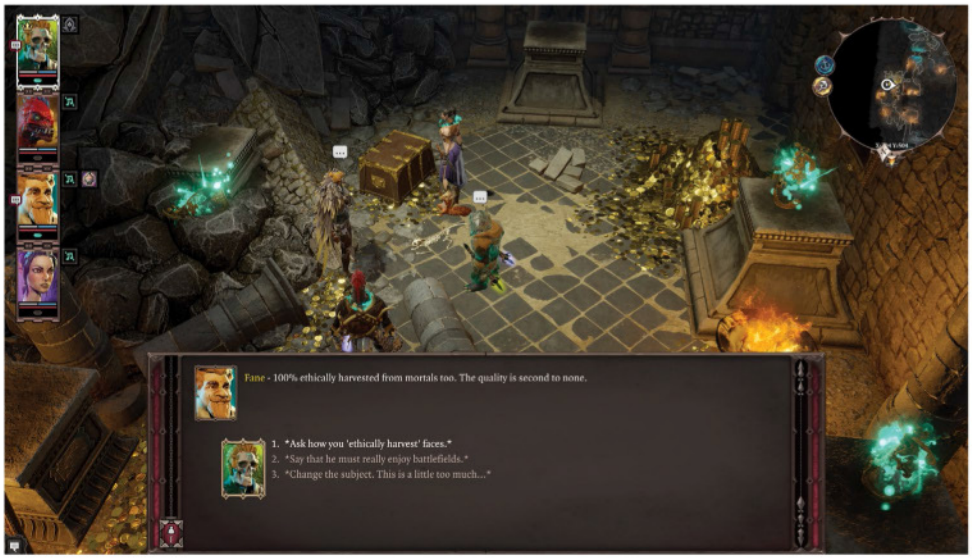
TROMPDOY
Eugh. If he's really a master illusionist, why couldn't he magic up something with a bit of razzle dazzle?
F

When we throw open the treasure chest to discover another piece of Braccus' armour set, our cries of celebration briefly drown out Trompdoy's sobbing. Two pieces down, just three more to go!

But then the trail seems to go cold. Hours pass and our search remains fruitless. We've uncovered great swaths of the map, and yet the remaining pieces of Braccus' armour remain elusive.

DROP DEAD GORGEOUS

There's nothing else for it. We're going to break back into Fort Joy. For fashion. Mercifully, our task is made a little easier by *Divinity*'s fast travel system, which lets you teleport to any previously discovered waypoint at the click of a button – including the waypoints within Fort Joy's walls. By doing so, Mister Fibula and his accomplices can zip into the prison grounds, quickly see whether the coast is clear, and then either proceed or zip away again to safety. The system isn't perfect – occasionally our search must pause while we shank a nosy guard – but it enables us to search the jail's quieter corners without alerting the entire garrison.



BELOW: One upside of sneaking back into Fort Joy with a levelled-up party was getting to pulverise Magisters and their goons.

Before long, we're deep underground exploring hidden passageways and foul oubliettes. It's hard to believe that regal togs might be hidden in a place like this, but any doubts are laid to rest when we discover the third piece of the armour set – a pair of armoured (yet tastefully tailored) trousers.

The helmet and gauntlets are the only pieces that elude us now, and boy-oh-boy does it take a while to find them. The Corrupted Tyrant's Helm is sealed away behind a cursed door in the ruins of an ancient armoury. Fibs and friends note with some measure of satisfaction that the curse has already claimed the lives of several Magisters that lie dead just metres away from the old king's prized helm. That satisfaction fades pretty quick when they try the door

THE FORMIDABLE BISHOP ALEXANDER LEADS THE MAGISTERS IN BATTLE

handle and get cursed themselves. We sheepishly return sometime later once Fibs has learned the relevant curse-breaking spell and claim our prize.

And then there's the Hands of the Tyrant, a pair of armoured gloves that are hidden at the centre of an ingenious maze guarded by horrible, sentient gargoyles. Getting these, it must be said, is an absolute mare. The air of elegance and refinement that Mister Fibula has carefully cultivated is tested to breaking point by the traps that litter this labyrinth. After all, it's difficult to look sophisticated when you've just blundered onto a pressure plate and been hit in the face with a fireball.

But these trials are eventually overcome. The maze is conquered, the chest is opened, and the gauntlets are claimed. With the completed outfit finally in hand, Mister Fibula's attention can return – ever so briefly – to the question of how to escape this accursed island. Flicking through the quest logs outlined in the game's journal, I can see that the Seekers are preparing to steal a Magister ship. Their mission is dangerous, and time is running out.

That will have to wait, however, while Mister Fibula sets up something approximating a catwalk. Sebille, Fane, and the Red Prince form a line (much like the press corps might at Paris Fashion Week) while Fibs struts his stuff, savouring the once-familiar sensation of sumptuous materials rubbing against dusty bone. For the first time since he arrived on this island, he feels that the world makes sense.

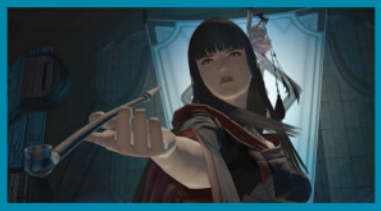
OK, now we really need to move. Mister Fibula arrives at the position the Seekers have marked for their assault. He's expecting a murmur of appreciation for his newly acquired finery. What he finds instead is quite a lot of dead Seekers. I can't help but wonder if we might have hurried up a bit, but it's too late for such doubts – all that's left is to join the assault. The Seekers valiantly charge the enemy position. Many are cut down. The formidable Bishop Alexander leads the Magisters in battle, accompanied by a burly retinue of archers, assassins, and spellcasters. At some point, a towering Voidworm joins the fight. It's all a bit of a blur.

The important thing, as far as Mister Fibula is concerned, is that his new duds remain unsoiled by the blood and battlefield oozes that coat the shoreline, even as we cut down the last of the Magister resistance and board the boat that serves as our means of escape. As the shores of the island recede into the distance, I wonder what awaits us on the other side of this sea. Maybe a tailor? A skeleton can dream. ■

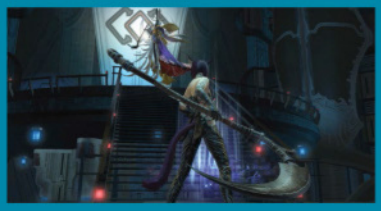
ABOVE: Our search would occasionally grind to a halt while Mister Fibula stopped to admire some art.

VILLAINESSES

I support women's rights, but I also support women's wrongs. *By Jess Kinghorn*



LEFT: *Catherine Classic* asks, "If you hate me that much, then why are you so obsessed with me?"



For many women, a not insignificant amount of energy is dedicated to doing what's right: exfoliating the right way, handling drama in the group chat the right way, making key career moves the right way, and on and on and on. So when a villainess comes along and says, in the immortal words of Eartha Kitt, "I want to be evil," is it any wonder my ears prick up?

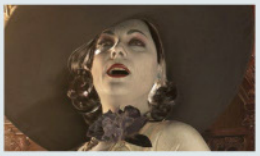
Shape-shifting assassin Orin the Red comes into the final act of *Baldur's Gate III* swinging, with a number of NPCs potentially revealing themselves to actually be her in disguise. It's a memorable introduction, with Orin leveraging social expectations to create unease rather than appease, before tearing away the mask to reveal the barely restrained pulsating id beneath. Wearing it all on her cartilaginous sleeve is just one reason why I love her – alongside her deeply relatable struggle for fatherly approval.

Shortly after, Orin can also rock up to where you sleep, call you a little piggy and threaten to paint the town with you don't wanna know what if you refuse a very temporary alliance. Naturally I said, "Take me, I'm yours!" She's far from the only villainess that wants to play with your heart though.

Catherine Classic itself is as divisive as its eponymous... this puzzler picks at the player with questions that interrogate their feelings about romantic relationships, prompting you to answer in one of two flavours of a false dichotomy. Do you think life starts with marriage? Who do you think is the real villain here? Katherine, Catherine, or Vincent himself? Arguably reductive in its attitudes towards both men and women, painting in these stark tones demands a strong reaction – which, like chiaroscuro, is often illuminating.

DISHONORABLE MENTIONS

A few more women behaving badly



LADY DIMITRESCU
It helps that *Resi Village*'s Lady Dimitrescu is also brought to unlife by actor Maggie Robertson.

GLADOS
Her withering judgement throughout *Portal*'s battery of tests is iconic all on its own.

FLEMETH
We all admire *Dragon Age*'s Flemeth. Voiced by Kate Mulgrew, she can turn into a dragon.

THE BOSS
The shadow of The Boss looms large over the entire *Metal Gear Solid* series.

BAD MOON RISING

The best villains don't just entertain, or offer catharsis by doing what we never would; they reveal something of the monster within our own heart.

Enter Yotsuyu goe Brutus, a secondary antagonist in *Final Fantasy XIV*'s *Stormblood* expansion, but the headline act in my opinion. Yotsuyu is saddled with a backstory so tragic, one wishes the writers had perhaps shown a little restraint. Orphaned at a young age, Yotsuyu's aunt and uncle expect her to engage in all the drudgery of domestic labour and social reproduction while never enjoying the comfort or protection of her community. This collective failure sparks Yotsuyu's searing hatred for Doma and its people, alongside a bottomless appetite for revenge. The fine edge of her fury eventually catches the eye of the invading Garlean empire's crown prince Zenos yae Galvus. The chronically bored tyrant recognises Yotsuyu's hatred as a useful tool, and appoints her as acting imperial viceroy of Doma to terrorise her countrymen.

THE BEST VILLAINS REVEAL SOMETHING OF THE MONSTER WITHIN OUR OWN HEART

Once the land is returned to its people, the patch quests offer a glimmer of what might've been possible had a young Yotsuyu been shown even a little bit of kindness. Unfortunately, this is explored by reducing the capacity of a powerful woman to that of an amnesiac child. Deeply questionable writing aside, part of the tension of this stretch of quests is that now Doma has command over its own future, will it repeat the sins that created a monster like Yotsuyu in the first place?

Mercifully, the infantilisation of this villainess is not permanent, though tragedy strikes again when she is leveraged as a blunt instrument by her own family once more.

Naturally, your Warrior of Light eclipses her, but they're powerless to stop her ambitious brother, Asahi. A Garlean ambassador, he orchestrated much of his sister's last act in a pathetic bid for Zenos' favour. Yotsuyu regards Asahi as emblematic of the very worst of Doma, refusing to see her suffering even when it took place right in front of him; instead of being the ally she desperately needed, he only ever looked right through her toward his own ambitions.

However, using the last of her power, Yotsuyu does what the Warrior of Light cannot and slakes her thirst for revenge with her own brother's blood. Always seen by others as a means to an end and never an end in herself, it's a stunning final image and one that not even Asahi can look away from. ■

RIGHT: Orin the Red cuts an imposing figure by wearing it all on her sleeve.

A huge, flashy, cinematic moment, but it's not just bombast

Adolescent Gnoblars trying to sneak into an adult film, minus the trenchcoat.

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III

Making the Old World feel young again. *By Matt Elliott*

Around a year ago, Creative Assembly released a grand cinematic trailer to commemorate the full release of Immortal Empires: a game mode that fuses together every campaign map from the *Total War: Warhammer* franchise. The trailer serves almost no functional purpose: instead, it's crammed with the sort of narrative moments that make Warhammer obsessives go glassy eyed, the significance of which would likely take me another article to explain: there's Grombrindal and Tyrion fighting back to back; Gotrek and Felix standing off against Skarbrand; and haughty elf lord Teclis accidentally dropping a racial slur in front of the Dwarf High King. Marvel fans have Captain America brandishing Thor's hammer in Avengers: Endgame; we have Richard Ridings, voice of Daddy Pig and Thorgrim Grudgebearer, losing his shit because an elf accidentally said 'short'. It's a tragedy that we'll never have a YouTube reaction video it deserves.

It's a huge, flashy, cinematic moment, but it's not just bombast. Immortal Empires is the largest *Total War* campaign ever, both in terms of physical map size and number of factions. When you fire up a new campaign for the first time, there are over 272 factions, the weakest of which, admittedly, will be eradicated by turn ten, devoured by more powerful armies like shrimp dip at an ogre wedding. If you have the DLC and previous iterations, an excessive 96 of these factions are playable at the start; a number I refuse to check because I don't want it not to be true.

Whatever you think about Creative Assembly's DLC pricing model, let's recognise this for what it is: the most absurdly detailed representation of Warhammer's Old World in any media, epic in sweep, dizzying in scope, and a method of play that didn't exist when the game was first released in 2022.

THRONG SONG

That volume of choice would be paralysing for any normal person, but for me, it's unusually easy. I want to understand how the game has changed since release, so this is the excuse I didn't need to play as

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE February 2022	**DEVELOPER** Creative Assembly
PUBLISHER Sega	**LINK** warhammer3.totalwar.com

Cutting through them like a bull in a Cathay shop.

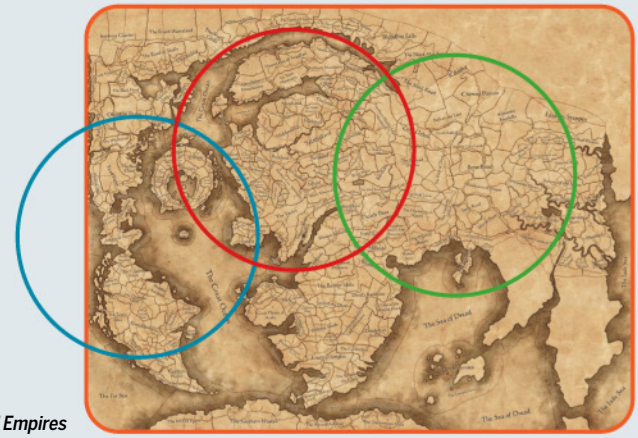
dwarfs. Not only are they the race I've played most, giving me a solid basis for comparison, but I'd rather be righting wrongs as the Dawi than basically anything else, including writing this feature. At any point in this article I might step away so I can go and shoot trolls with an Organ Gun, and the beauty of print is that you'll never know. The question is: which dwarfs? Each of the Legendary Lords has a different starting position, which makes all the difference when considering the vibe of your campaign. Let's use Grombrindal as an example. In the lore, he's the White Dwarf: a mythical figure who appears when the Dawi are in mortal peril. He's part Doctor Who, part Santa Claus, except he uses a rune axe instead of a sonic screwdriver and every greenskin is on his naughty list. In *Warhammer III*, Grombrindal now has his own faction, The Ancestral Throng, who start on the far west of the map in the mountains of Naggaroth. Not only are you beset on all sides by aggressive Dark Elves and Chaos demons, it's about as far away from the fabled Bugmans Brewery as any Dwarf starting point on the map. It's also an example of how different it feels like to, say, playing as Belagar Ironhammer and repeating the mad rush to reclaim Karak Eight Peaks. This is the true appeal of Immortal Empires, and the thing I love most about coming back: the sheer scale and complexity breathes fresh life into an older game. Even without new mechanics, I'm happy just seeing how each campaign plays out compared to its developmental forebears. Perhaps I'm easily pleased, but it would literally be enough to just replay it as my favourite faction on a map the size of a literal planet.

DEEPS IMPACT

I'm going to stay with dwarfs for a few more paragraphs, because they elegantly represent how the game has changed and also because there's nothing you can do to stop me. This isn't merely a case of playing the same factions in different locations: many of the races have been overhauled, completely altering how they function. The dwarfs now have the Age of Reckoning mechanic, designed to represent how the

MALLUS AFORETHOUGHT

How Immortal Empires stacks up against previous campaigns



TOP: Is Tamurkhan being shot to pieces or are those go-faster stripes?

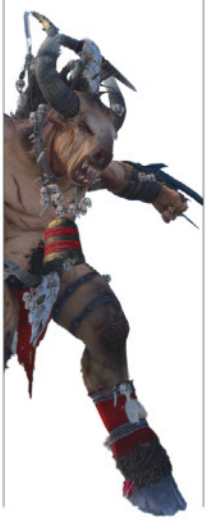
TOP RIGHT: Chaos Dwarf bombardments make normal artillery look like armpit farts.

grudgement works in the lore. There is, famously, no Khazalid word for 'forgiveness', and righting wrongs is central to their culture. Dwarf factions now have a ten-turn timer, during which they can fill up a special grudge-o-meter (it's not called that) by fighting specific armies or taking settlements. The problem with this, in previous iterations, was that it encourages the classically insular dwarfs to play wide, not tall. It feels wrong to play as expansionist Dawi, who regard anyone who strays too far from the Holds with the same deep suspicion as an elderly relative trying kombucha for the first time. Creative Assembly addressed this with an update that added a Deeps mechanic, which allows you to spend significant resources expanding key settlements in a very Dwarf-y way, digging deeply and greedily to make regions more functional and profitable. From a lore perspective, you're opening previously lost regions of the Dwarf Underway. In terms of gameplay, this makes your biggest settlements more profitable, and you can lock down settlements by sealing the Holds: a defensive choice that buffs your garrisons and siege defences, but damages your diplomatic relations.

A MONSTROUSLY CRUEL RACE OF DAEMONSMITHS AND INDUSTRIALISTS

HASHUT IT OUT

As well as overhauling old factions, a significant new one has been added since release... and it's more dwarfs. Stay with me; I promise these are the least dwarfy dwarfs in the Warhammer world. They use magic, grow exotic beards and prize innovation. Forge of the Chaos dwarfs adds the Dawi-Zharr, a monstrously cruel race of Daemonsmiths and industrialists. They're a great example of how the simple addition of a new race can change how *Warhammer III* plays. It turns the game into a management sim of sorts, albeit one with rocket batteries and hobgoblins. Expansion and maintenance become dependent on how you manage your resources and output, which sounds rather benign until you realise one of the key components is forced labour. This means managing your building types, operating at maximum efficiency, and using trade convoys to sell your ill-gotten and unholy wares.



It's a fascinating twist on the standard *Total War* format, and, in all honesty, it feels like a game in itself. You also need to consider your standing in the Tower of Zharr, the religious centrepoint of the Chaos Dwarf world, which is basically what the Vatican would be if God was swapped out with a malevolent flaming bull-daemon.

The most recent DLC update also does a fine job of changing how existing races play. The new Ogre Legendary Lord, Golgfag Maneater, for example, is a muscular example of a gimmick campaign that feels significantly different without losing what makes the series appealing. You accept contracts from various factions, helping them achieve their diplomatic goals by raiding, razing, and outright violence. The joy of this is that you don't suffer the same diplomatic penalties as you'd get attacking every enemy on the map. Once your contract is over, you take your reward, make your peace and often watch your employer rise to power. You're a kingmaker who gets paid in meat. The best thing about this is that it offers a stepped-back look at the vast Immortal Empires map – a game mode so massive that I'll literally never see all of it. ■

MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST OF THE BEST GAMES YOU CAN PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Jody Macgregor

JODY MACGREGOR

Fantasy is my favourite genre because it lets you imagine an impossible magical world where you might be able to afford to own your own hovel.

SOVL: FANTASY WARFARE

perwahl.github.io/SOVLRules

Your units are colour-coded rectangles, with line drawings to represent artillery or monsters. Orcs, elves and humans take turns manoeuvring and rolling dice to resolve combat. It's a Warhammer battle report from an old White Dwarf magazine turned into a game.

FINAL FANTASY XVI

uk.finalfantasyxvi.com

I'd heard it was like Game of Thrones, but I didn't realise it was a game where people shout "Fuck!" and then get messily decapitated with an axe by somebody riding a chocobo. The contrast between horny sweary ultraviolence and, like, moogles is hilarious.

QUEST FOR GLORY 4: SHADOWS OF DARKNESS

questforglory.fandom.com

Mordavia is a place of darkness. As a graduate of a school for heroes, it's up to you to cleanse the place of an entire Hammer horror marathon of ghouls and ghosts. Like the other *Quest for Glory* games, it's as much point-and-click adventure as RPG.

SONGS OF CONQUEST

songsofconquest.com

The upcoming *Heroes of Might and Magic* sequel might turn out good, but if Ubisoft screws up again it won't matter – we've got *Songs of Conquest*. It has that mix of questing, citybuilding and warfare, only it discourages doomstacks with magic that rewards a diverse unit roster.

DRAGON AGE: THE VEILGUARD

ea.com/dragon-age

I love my shield. I throw it then ricochet it around like a pinball, and blocking at the right time sets nearby enemies on fire somehow. I also love my tea-drinking necromancer and my ADHD artificer, but the shield is important. Finally, a *Dragon Age* where being a warrior is fun.

REGALIA: OF MEN AND MONARCHS

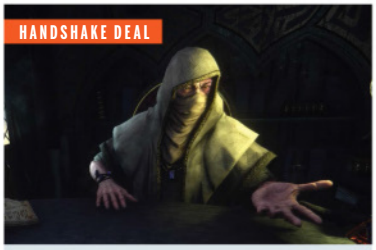
x.com/pixelated_milk

One of those JRPGs that doesn't come from Japan, *Regalia* has the social connection-making of an Atlus game without the grind. If the combat doesn't grab you, turn the difficulty all the way down and just focus on the anime storytelling and being friends with everyone.

FORT TRIUMPH

allingames.com/game/fort-triumph

When your Dungeon Master lets you push pillars or chop trees to crush your enemies? That's *Fort Triumph*. When you cast a grease spell then slide a boulder into some goblins like a bowling ball, but then it keeps going and hits the elf? That is also *Fort Triumph*.



HAND OF FATE 2

defiantdev.com/hof2.html

You know what would make a roguelike deckbuilder better? If it had the combat system from the *Batman: Arkham* games. And also recruitable companions, choose-your-own adventure branching plot paths, and a dealer twice as sinister as the one from *Inscryption*.

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THE PCG INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: **THE BIG SLI**

PART 4

"Eddie, if you go to the gaming PC Stanley was using to play Fantasy Crown," I said, "I'm sure you will find the warhammer ensconced within it." "What nonsense," Vivienne snapped, but Eddie, still reeling from the Brody betrayal revelation, stormed out of the tavern before returning with the tower case. Sliding off the side panel, which was emblazoned with the Fantasy Crown logo, revealed the weapon. "You see, this was a crime no one person committed. Carmen struck the final blow, yes, but it was plotted and executed by Vivienne, too. And after Carmen had done the deed, it was you Vivienne who secreted the warhammer upon your person. Then, in the chaos following your supposed discovery of the body, which drew Stanley away from his machine, you took the warhammer and swiftly planted it in Stanley's computer case while everyone else was still reeling around the back of the tavern. And there would be no fingerprints linking you to the weapon, as I notice both you and Carmen are wearing cosplay gloves. Stanley's though, would be, as no doubt he was encouraged to go hands-on with the weapon at today's event. Together you would kill a man and get away with it.

"Isn't that right… Anna?", I said as I then quickly turned to face the elven beauty who had started this case. "As you were part of this appalling murder, too. As it was you, the Royal Council's spymaster who, after concocting this plot with Carmen and Vivienne, had befriended Rusty, stolen his log-in details, left the Fantasy Crown expo early and then, after returning to your apartment, had logged in as Rusty and taken Profion into the auction house. And why? To acquire Rusty's one of a kind Royal Dragon Mount which, as Dynamite Games has confirmed to me, you sold to a new account under your control for a huge sum of in-game money, supplied to you, of course, by Vivienne from the royal family's treasury. You'd wanted to make this sale look above board, and also to cover up who eventually would own the Royal Dragon Mount, the royal family of Starensia. You'd no doubt transfer it to them in a few months' time. Without it, they saw Rusty as a potential challenger to their supremacy, so as he wouldn't sell it, he had to die. The cherry on top? You'd hire renowned PI Dick Ray-Tracing to come and fall into your rigged crime scene, and who would then be fooled into accusing Stanley officially and clearing your names."

A heartbeat passed as all three women stared at each other. Then Vivienne grabbed the warhammer and launched herself at me. "I'll kill you for what you've done Ray-Tracing!"

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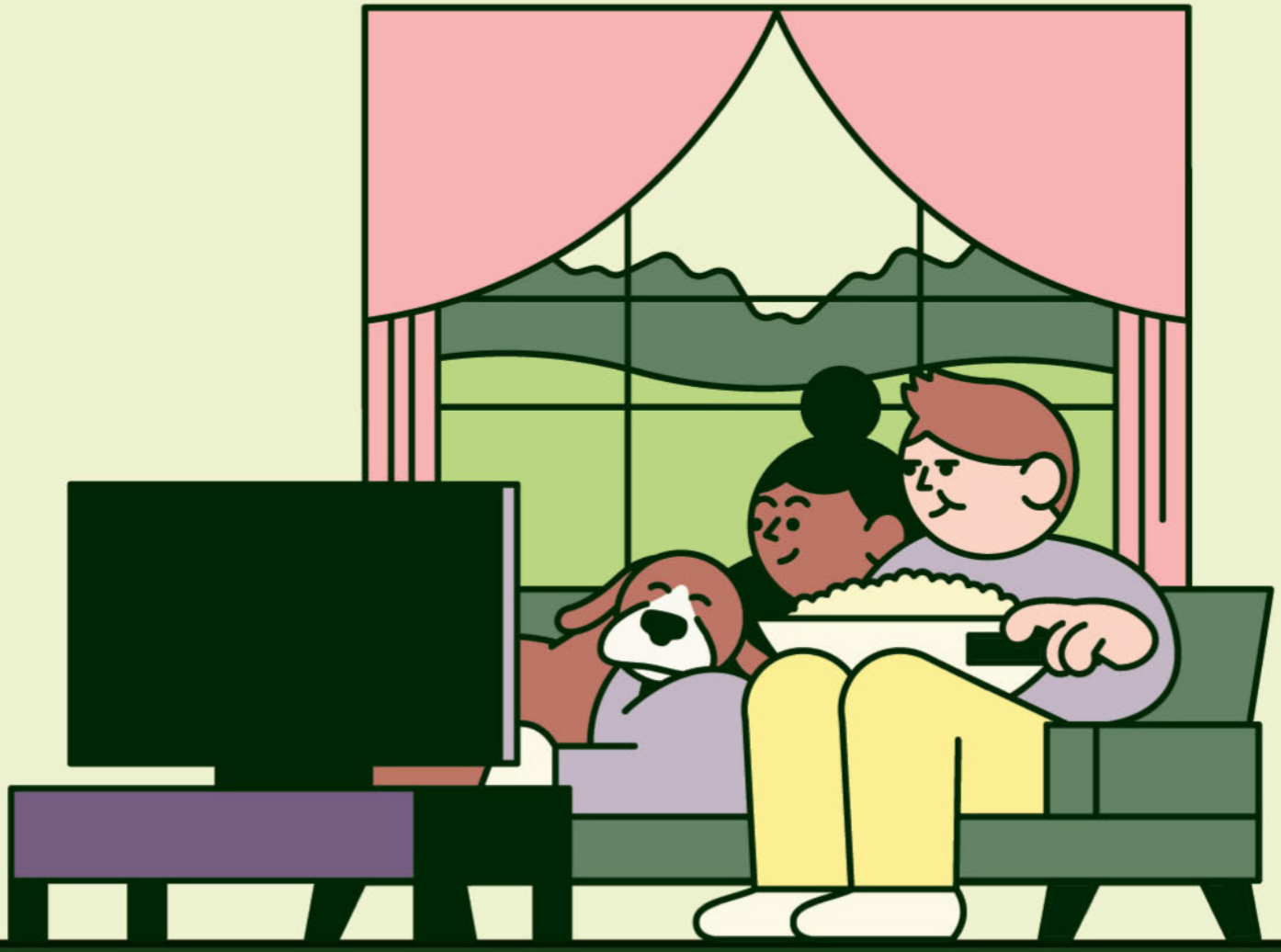

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